

At Another Time

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At Another Time

by [poetikat](#)

Summary

When Ciri prepared to go back in time to 1250s Oxenfurt to return with a solution to Corvo Bianco's constant vampire attacks, Geralt knew exactly what would happen—and he refused to tell her.

“I know you,” he said. “You’ll want to get involved, fix things. Don’t. Some things just have to happen. Let them.”

But when a pair of brothers insert themselves in her business in the past and won't stop being charming... that doesn't count as “getting involved”, right?

Notes

Beta read by brightspot149—thank you so much!

On the subject of warnings: this is a fairly lighthearted fic, all things considered. Still, bandits will be bandits, so there will be warnings on a chapter by chapter basis as things show up. Nothing dark, but I'll put it all at the top and let readers know ahead of time what's coming.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

A Secret and a Warning

“Awful sorry about your horse, Miss Witcher,” Ciri’s guide said earnestly. He gazed down at her as she stepped from his rickety cart to the side of the narrow mountain road. “And you’re sure you want to be let off here? There’s nowt around for miles. You’ll freeze to death by nightfall.”

“I’m certain,” Ciri said. She held her bloodstained, acid-eaten saddlebags to her chest and winced slightly as they jostled her bandage.

“Ealdorman said you could have Dumpling,” he said, jerking his thumb at the back of the cart where an old, gray-furred nanny goat stood staring at her with dull amber eyes. “For your troubles.”

Dumpling didn’t seem to understand what she was being offered for, or that she was being offered at all. She was too old to have kids or make milk, too thin to tempt a monster, and too dim to be her own Lil Bleater. All she’d end up as was stew.

Ciri was hungry, but not hungry enough.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to take her from her owners,” she demurred. “And look at her, poor thing. She’d miss all this fresh mountain air.”

Her guide and Dumpling both blinked at her. After a second, the man snapped the horse’s reins.

“Mighty generous of you. Take care on the Path, Miss Witcher.”

“Don’t go hunting any more archgriffins!” she called after him.

Ciri waited until the cart had rolled around the bend before she reached for her magic. She let out a sigh, tugging her hood higher as she left the freezing Blue Mountains behind and stepped out onto the sun-warmed cobblestones of Corvo Bianco.

Even in December, Toussaint remained lovely as ever. The vineyards were fallow, but the air was temperate. The late afternoon sky was a rich artist’s blue, cobalt shading into ultramarine. A light breeze carried the tart-sweet scent of winter cherries from Geralt’s garden to her nose. As well as—

She sniffed curiously. Sulfur? And was that Nigredo? A few other things, as well, too scorched to make out. She laid her hand on the hilt of her dagger and ventured up the path toward her parents’ villa.

A sheen of something silvery on the cobblestones caught her eye, and she knelt to swipe a gloved finger across it.

Moon Dust?

And a splatter of blood, too dark to be human.

Ciri got to her feet with another wince and hurried on.

Corvo Bianco seemed devoid of its usual bustle as she approached the house. The hands and the workers were nowhere to be seen. Another silvery patch gleamed ahead of her, right at the base of the stairs. She frowned and stepped over it.

“I’m home!” she said as she pushed open the front door. “Is anyone here?”

Yennefer swept out of the bedroom and rushed to embrace her only to stop short. She pushed Ciri’s hood back and set her hands on her shoulders. “You look awful. What happened?”

“An archgriffin happened,” she said briefly. She examined her mother. She didn’t look well either, slightly stressed and a bit paler than usual, with faint dark circles beneath her violet eyes. “It would have been fine, but between the snow and the griffin targeting Nadir, things became... difficult.”

“And your horse?”

Ciri gestured to the bloodstains and swallowed. “Dead.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. I know you liked that mare.” She led Ciri over to the table and gently pushed her into a chair, tugging her saddlebags out of her arms. “We were starting to think you were going to winter somewhere else.”

“Not a chance. I just got caught up in things. You know how it is.”

“Your letters have kept Geralt from taking up his sword and venturing out to join you, so thank you for being so diligent.” Yennefer carefully peeled back the bandage beneath Ciri’s left collarbone and frowned deeply. “Stay here and take your shirt off. I’ll get something to clean that.”

Ciri undid her belts and corset, tugged her gloves and hood off, and gingerly slipped her shirt over her head, letting her clothes and weapons fall to the floor beside her. She slouched back in her chair and looked around the cozily lit space. They’d redecorated a bit since last she’d visited. Geralt had a different suit of armor in the corner, and Yennefer had changed the dreamy pastoral landscape for a stormy seascape. The swords, though. Those never seemed to change.

And that old saber that made her medallion tremble always had what felt like a place of honor on the wall.

Yennefer returned with a bottle of spirit and a small tub of ointment along with a fresh roll of linen bandages. She sat in the chair beside Ciri and pulled it closer, the legs making a quiet scudding noise as she did.

“I hope whoever hired you to take on an archgriffin in the dead of winter paid you generously for it at least,” she said as she dabbed the alcohol over Ciri’s ragged cut.

Ciri hissed under her breath. “Fifty-five ducats. Not nearly enough to buy a new horse of decent quality, let alone—”

“Armor?” Yennefer suggested dryly.

“I don’t want armor,” Ciri said. She held still for the generous swipe of cold ointment and stifled a sneeze at the potent herbal scent. “It will only slow me down.”

“Or keep you alive long enough to return to us next winter, stubborn girl,” Yennefer chided her. She wound the bandage across her shoulder and under her arm, over and under, over and under, before tying it off with a small, neat knot. “There. You can get dressed again.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

Yennefer narrowed her eyes at her. “Transparent. You’re as reckless as Geralt, you know.”

Ciri pulled her shirt back on and smiled at Yennefer. “Where do you think I get it from?”

Her mother laughed at that.

“So”—Ciri tugged her corset back around her waist and hooked the fastenings together—“The Moon Dust I saw outside. You had vampire trouble?”

“Mm.” Yennefer leaned back in her chair. “Last night, three garkains. The night before, two alps. And before that, an ekimmara and a fleder.”

Ciri sat up straight and looked Yennefer over quickly. “Were you injured? Was Geralt?”

“I wasn’t,” Yennefer said, her wild black curls bouncing as she shook her head. “Geralt took some minor injuries, but it was nothing that a dose of Swallow couldn’t fix.”

“Well, that’s a relief to hear,” Ciri said. She slumped back again. “But why so many? And such varied types—that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Oh, but it does.” Yennefer scoffed, a soft, unamused huff of air. “Regis came to visit. It’s been two years, after all. We thought if he didn’t advertise his presence, if he just stuck to Corvo Bianco’s property line, everything would be all right. But the local vampires caught wind of him somehow. And now he’s gone again, and we’re the target of their ire.”

Ciri stiffened in indignation. “He didn’t stay to help?”

“What help could he offer?” Yennefer pointed out calmly. “Kill more vampires and bring even more trouble down on his head, and on ours? With him gone, their anger will burn out eventually.”

“Can you withstand them that long?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” Yennefer replied. She stood abruptly and beckoned to Ciri. “Come. Let’s get you settled upstairs. Geralt will be back from Beauclair soon, and we’ll have an answer to that question. And something resembling supper as well.”

“Where are Marlene and Barnabas-Basil, anyway?” Ciri asked as she scooped up her belts and gloves and hefted her saddlebags again.

“We sent everyone either to go home or to stay at inns in Beauclair until this is dealt with. We’re paying for the rooms, and they’re receiving their wages as if nothing were out of the ordinary. We don’t want them starving on account of the vampires.”

Ciri nodded and followed her up the stairs to the cozy guest room. The faintest hint of mandrake still hung in the air, mingling with the slightly stronger scent of lemon balm coming from the bar of soap sitting on the edge of the bedside table atop a washrag. The bedding was neatly made and the pillow plumped, and a little sprig of lavender lay across the folded-down edge of the sheet. They’d been anticipating her arrival.

She dropped her burdens by the foot of the bed and turned to her mother. “I suppose I ought to unpack.”

“And draw some water from the well to clean off,” Yennefer advised her. “You’ll feel better once you have the dirt off you.”

Ciri touched her jaw and frowned in agreement at the faint, tacky graininess coating her skin.

She gave Ciri a small smile and turned to leave. “I’m going to go see what I can pull together in the kitchen to go with the soup I have on. I certainly can’t leave it to Geralt.”

She swept back down the stairs with a graceful flick of her black skirt, her subtle perfume trailing after her. Ciri glanced down at her saddlebags and swords and sat at the edge of the bed beside them to halfheartedly poke through her belongings.

The full purse would come in handy this winter, no doubt. She had to restock on essentials. But Geralt would likely have plenty of sword oils, bombs, and sword repair kits lying around. She’d also need better tack to replace her damaged saddlebags, and all that was lost along with poor Nadir.

Her clothes would need cleaning as well before she put them away. The last few weeks on the Path had left them considerably rank, as she’d had no access to either a decent body of water or a laundress’ services. She pulled a grimy shirt from one of the bags and wrinkled her nose.

The door was thrown open downstairs, and she dropped the shirt and shot to her feet. She pounded down the stairs to fly into Geralt’s outstretched arms, laughing as he closed them around her firmly. Her cut throbbed, and she just squeezed tighter.

“We weren’t expecting you for another few days,” Geralt said when he let her go and set her back on her feet. “Didn’t see your horse in the stable, either.”

“Nadir didn’t survive my last contract,” Ciri admitted with a grimace. “Archgriffin.”

“Ah. Sorry about that.” He looked her over swiftly. “Yen patched you up?”

Ciri nodded. “I’m all taken care of, I promise.”

“Good. We want you safe out there.”

“Tell me about the vampires,” Ciri said, tugging him toward the kitchen. “Yennefer said something about you having an answer for whether you could outlast them?”

“Yeah, about that.”

He waited until they’d rounded the corner. Yennefer stood in the kitchen, busily slicing a crusty loaf of bread and stirring something aromatic in a tall, broad pot. She looked up at them and raised an eyebrow at Geralt.

“Well?” she asked him.

“She said no,” he said simply.

“Damn it,” Yennefer cursed. She stirred harder.

“Who said no, and to what?” Ciri asked.

“Orianna,” Geralt clarified. “A bruxa and ‘patron of the arts’ who lives in Beauclair. I went to ask her to call them off, see if she could control them the way Dettlaff could. She said that wasn’t her specialty, and even if it was, Regis is anathema to other vampires now. She’d only make herself a target, too.”

“So can’t and won’t,” Ciri summed up.

Yennefer frowned into the pot of soup. “Then we’d better think of alternatives quickly. Go and sit, you two. I’ll have supper out in a few minutes.”

Ciri retreated to the dining table with Geralt and took the seat Yennefer had steered her into earlier. Geralt dropped down beside her and propped his elbows on the table, leaning forward as he looked her over again. She spotted his brief worry as his eyes caught on the half-hidden bandage beneath her shirt.

“Tell me about this archgriffin,” he prompted her.

Ciri slouched back in her chair and groaned. “I was on my way here when that happened. These idiots in a village in the Blue Mountains had been dealing with an archgriffin attacking their livestock all autumn, and they thought the winter would be a perfect time to put an end to it. You know, once it went into hibernation.”

“Oh, great.” Geralt shook his head. “Bet that went well.”

“They burned its nest and woke it, and it killed the entire party they sent out,” she told him. “So then it was starving, furious, and homeless, and the village was a perfect target.”

Geralt made a low sound of disgust at the back of his throat. “Of course.”

“I was only passing through,” she said, “but I took it on as a last contract for the winter. I convinced them to give me a goat to lure it out and trekked out to where they’d reported

seeing it when it wasn't attacking... But the snow was too deep to go on foot. I had to take Nadir. And the griffin thought she looked like a better meal than a gamey old nanny goat."

"Always rough losing a horse," Geralt commiserated. "But you brought the griffin down?"

"Mm-hmm. I had hybrid oil and a few samum bombs, and that was enough once it was—distracted by Nadir. It got a good swipe in, though," she admitted. "Luckily, it saved its acid for my poor mare."

"I told you last time you were here, we can get Lafargue to adapt the Cat School or Manticore armor for you," Geralt said. "You really shouldn't be out there in just a shirt and that..." He gestured at her waist. "Corset. And fighting in heels."

"Geralt, I can teleport," Ciri said patiently. "I rarely get injured. And armor is restrictive. It hinders my movement."

He let out a heavy sigh and reached for his milk-white hair, lifting a strand and waving it at her. "You're going to turn my hair gray."

Ciri stifled a giggle and looked over at Yennefer's entrance. Her mother pressed a kiss to the top of her head as she set a plate in front of her, laden with a full, steaming bowl of soup and a thick slice of buttered bread.

"Come help me bring out the rest," Yennefer told Geralt. "And we'll need to choose a wine for supper."

"Do we still have that Sansretour chardonnay?" he asked her as he followed her back into the kitchen.

"Chardonnay?" Ciri heard Yennefer reply, her voice indistinct. "With vegetable soup?"

"The pinot noir, then."

Ciri dredged her bread through the soup and took a hasty bite. She huffed a bit at the heat against the roof of her mouth, then went for another. It wasn't quite up to Marlene's standards, but it was rich and filling, thick with vegetables and liberally seasoned with herbs.

Geralt and Yennefer returned bearing their own plates and a trio of wine glasses, a dark bottle tucked under Geralt's arm. They sat down on either side of her, and as Geralt attended to the bottle's cork, Yennefer gently rapped Ciri's knuckles with an outstretched spoon and handed it to her.

"I see manners were the first thing to go when you left us last," she said with a raised eyebrow.

"Let her have dinner and a good night's sleep before you civilize her again, Yen," Geralt said, setting out the glasses and pouring a generous amount of a deep red wine into all three.

"Hmm." Yennefer's judgmental eyebrow left Ciri. "Tomorrow, then."

Silence fell for a few minutes as they ate and drank. Ciri tried to pace herself, mindful of Yennefer's rebuke about her manners. Food on the Path was never as good as it was here at Corvo Bianco, though, and some weeks were hungrier than others. This past week included.

"I could write to Eskel," Geralt said eventually as his spoon scraped the bottom of his bowl. "Two witchers would be better than one."

"It would take him weeks to get here," Yennefer pointed out, "and it might just make them angrier."

"I'm angry."

"And it's three witchers," Ciri added, narrowing her eyes at Geralt. She lifted the wolf's-head medallion from around her neck in emphasis. "We didn't chase down the last Crone for a lark."

"Three witchers," Geralt amended. "But you're injured. I don't want you fighting until the bandage is ready to come off."

"Fine," Ciri agreed reluctantly.

"If asking Eskel for help's not an option, then what?" Geralt asked Yennefer.

"Triss, perhaps?" Yennefer sounded as reluctant as Ciri. "I can contact her with my megascope, and she could travel here by portal."

"And then we still have the same problem of making the vampires angrier," Geralt said. He drained the last of his wine and stood. "Going to draw some water for Ciri before it gets dark. Be right back."

"Take your sword," Yennefer called after him as he walked away from the table.

Ciri dared to swipe her last bite of bread through the small amount of soup left at the bottom of her bowl and ate it before Yennefer's amused eyes.

"Help me clear the table," was all her mother said in response.

She followed Yennefer back to the kitchen laden with dishes and carefully lowered them into a soapy tub of water. In the other room, the front door slammed. "If you can't call on outside help, what will you do?"

Yennefer made another thoughtful hm-ing sound. "There is... Well. I suppose it's just a rumor now. Hardly worth pursuing in this situation."

"Yes?"

They went back out to the dining table and sat again, and Yennefer poured herself another glass of wine. "A sorcerer from Ban Ard Academy, Melchior Fabin, used to be known as the preeminent expert on wards. He wrote all manner of treatises on the subject. He even claimed

to have perfected them to such a degree that he could keep out whatever beast or monster he wished—demon, post-Conjunction creature, or common household pest.”

“And could he?” Ciri asked.

Yennefer took a sip of her wine and shrugged. “He boasted that the first book in the series would give everyone the ability to repel vampires from their premises for good. Not true higher vampires, but anything from a plumard to a mula. And two weeks later, he was violently slaughtered on the streets late at night, his corpse drained of blood.”

“Oh.” Ciri leaned forward. “But then... He did figure it out?”

“I would assume so, since he wasn’t safely tucked away inside his home where his wards would have been when the attack happened. That, or the mere rumor of it was enough to get him killed. The unpublished manuscript developed something of an unlucky reputation, however, and was shuffled between university libraries across the Continent until it eventually landed in Oxenfurt Academy to gather dust.”

The front door opened again, and Geralt came in with a sloshing bucket of water.

“So that should be easy, then,” Ciri said. “I can just go to Oxenfurt Academy and find the manuscript—”

“It went missing in the early twelve fifties,” Yennefer interrupted. “Someone borrowed it and never brought it back.”

Ciri sat back. “Oh. Well, that’s still doable, you know. I can go back to right before it’s borrowed. Or I might even be the borrower.”

“Ciri, you shouldn’t just use your Source powers to travel through time on an *errand*,” Yennefer began.

Geralt interrupted, hefting the bucket at Ciri. “Got your water. Can I have a word, Yen?”

Ciri frowned at him in annoyance as she got up to take the bucket from him. She wasn’t even back an hour and already he was keeping something from her.

He didn’t seem to notice her irritation. His eyes went past her to the old, well-loved saber hanging on the wall.

“You left clean clothes behind in the wardrobe from your last visit,” Yennefer said. “And I had new ones made for you as well.”

Ciri nodded. “Thank you. And thanks for the water.”

Geralt gave her a distracted smile. “Go get cleaned up. Maybe read for a while? The vampires won’t show for another hour or so, and you’re—”

“Injured, and not to fight,” she sighed. “I know.”

Ciri hauled her water upstairs and set the bucket down heavily by the bed. She stripped off quickly, grabbing the soap and washrag from the bedside table, and she plunged them into the cold well water with a shiver. Hurriedly, efficiently, she scrubbed off the accumulated dirt and grime of the past two weeks. She knelt and dunked her head into the bucket with a low shriek at the temperature.

She wrung her hair out over the bucket and stood, skin pink and smelling strongly of lemon balm. Fresh clothes hung in the wardrobe, just as Yennefer had promised, and she dressed again with faint relief at finally wearing something clean. She cast about for a book like Geralt had suggested, not quite in the mood to pull her lone volume of poetry from her saddlebags. Yennefer had a dozen of those tawdry romances lying around the house, after all. Surely one of them had to be up here.

“—described her to me perfectly.”

Geralt’s voice floated faintly up the stairs.

Ciri slowed her movements, careful not to do anything so suspicious as freeze in a witcher’s house. She went to the shelf and perused its contents intently, her ears open for further conversation.

“There are plenty of blonde women with green eyes, Geralt.”

“Ash-blond hair with white streaks and a scar on her left cheek. He got... detailed.” Geralt sounded uncomfortable.

“Then...” Yennefer’s voice dropped off.

Ciri grabbed a book at random and retreated to the bed, her curiosity pricked and her mind whirling.

Who had described her to Geralt so thoroughly? And why didn’t he want her to know?

She did her best to put the overheard conversation from her thoughts, and she laughed to herself as she read the title of the book aloud. “‘The Princess and the Rake’.”

She’d read that one before. It was utterly ridiculous, and though she’d never admit it, also her favorite: an Ofieri princess in disguise as a wandering mercenary who went on adventures and fell in love with a Toussaintois knight-errant who was secretly a former bandit chief atoning for a life of crime.

“Ridiculous,” she said, and she settled against her pillow to enjoy the romp with Ameera and Sir Matthieu, her attention half on the sounds of her parents moving around downstairs.

They might not let her fight tonight, but at least she could help patch them up when it was over.

Ciri didn’t broach the subject of what Geralt had kept from her over breakfast, or after that, when they cleaned up the mess of the alp and nekurat corpses together. It wasn’t until he

came to sit on the lowest step of the stairs leading to the front door as she squeezed the water from her last shirt and hung it on the clothesline that she asked.

“Why did you make me leave the room when Yennefer and I were talking about the manuscript?”

“I didn’t make you do anything,” he denied.

She scoffed at him and jammed the wooden peg over the wet shirt with a little more force than necessary. “Really, Geralt. I’m not a child. I’m twenty-six. Whatever you’re keeping from me, I deserve to know. It’s about me, isn’t it?”

“It’s...” He brought a hand up to his face and rubbed his beard. Exhaustion lined his catlike yellow eyes. It had been a long night. “You’re right. I just wasn’t expecting it. I half-thought it wasn’t ever going to happen.”

“What?”

“Met someone a few years back,” he said. “A man who was around in Oxenfurt in the twelve fifties.”

“And?”

“And you made an impression on him,” he said. That edge of discomfort she’d heard yesterday evening made a reappearance.

Ciri stepped away from the clothesline and came over to the steps, her heart speeding up. Geralt looked up at her from his seat in resignation.

“Then I’m going back,” she said, a smile growing across her face. “Did he know what I was there for? Did he say if it worked? Who was it?”

Geralt shook his head. “He didn’t say. And”—he hesitated—“I don’t think I should tell you about him. Or anyone else from that time.”

“What?” Ciri put her hands on her hips and fixed him with her grandmother’s best glare. “Why not?”

As usual, her glare didn’t move him an inch. “I know you,” he said. “I tell you about him and his brother—”

“So there’s a brother!”

“—and you’ll want to get involved, fix things. *Don’t*. You’ll draw attention you can’t afford to have. The deadly, too powerful to be a demon kind. Some things just have to happen. Let them.”

She opened her mouth to argue—Geralt, of all people, telling her not to get involved or fight destiny!—and stopped, the words drying up at the utterly serious expression in his eyes.

“Too powerful to be a demon?” she asked instead.

He nodded. “An Oxenfurt professor described him to me as evil incarnate, shortly before he died of a broken neck from accidentally leaving a protective circle he’d been living inside to keep the being out.”

“You’re still here, though,” she pointed out.

“Ciri, please.” Geralt looked up at her, his hands tense on his knees. “Take my word for it, just this once. Get the manuscript and come back, and don’t stick your nose in any strangers’ business.”

“I’ll have to stick my nose in a little, though, if I’m to ‘make an impression’ on whoever it is,” she said.

Geralt made a pained face. “Yeah, that’s... I’m going to start pulling things together for your trip. You figure out clothes and stuff with Yen. I’ll go annoy Cianfanelli about exchanging currency so you have coins with the right head of state on them. Can’t spend coins with Emhyr on their faces when King Vizimir sits on the throne.”

She stepped back to let him stand. “Thank you,” she said sincerely. “And don’t worry, Geralt. I’ll stay out of trouble.”

He laughed under his breath and drew her in for a gentle hug, mindful of her healing cut. “I’d love to see you manage that someday.”

“You’re terrible,” she said with a laugh, pulling away. “Go. I’ll pack.”

Geralt patted her shoulder and headed for the stable, and Ciri made her way up the steps to the house.

“Up here, Ciri,” Yennefer called out as she came inside.

She found her mother in the guest room, folding and stacking her clothes and laying them out beside a rucksack at precise lines and angles. Yennefer’s hands smoothed a small wrinkle from a shirt, lingering on the soft linen for a moment.

“It’ll be fine,” Ciri said.

“Of course it will,” Yennefer sniffed. “You’ll go to twelve fifty, which to my knowledge is a year where nothing of note happened in Redania. You’ll go to the Oxenfurt Academy library, find the manuscript, and use your powers to come right back home. Simple enough.”

“Then why are you fussing?” she asked.

Yennefer took a stack of shirts and moved them on top of a neatly folded trio of trousers. She sat in the empty space and patted the bed beside her. “Sit.”

Ciri obediently sat, and she waited for her mother to gather her thoughts.

“We decided against asking Triss or Eskel for help because we didn’t want to make the situation worse,” Yennefer said after several seconds. “Truthfully, we’d be better off taking a long holiday for the winter and coming back in the spring. Adding wards to the property that will specifically repel vampires might make us safe here at Corvo Bianco, but it could keep them angry indefinitely, and we’d be vulnerable to them whenever we left the villa. And yet...”

“And yet, someone remembered me in the past,” Ciri said. “So I clearly went. Or I’m going to go.”

“Precisely.”

“I can bring the book to you and you can decide to use it or not once you have it,” she offered.

“You don’t mind that it might end up being a pointless task?”

Ciri shrugged. “Not really.”

Yennefer gave her a look. “You’re too curious for your own good sometimes.”

Before Ciri could muster a defense, Yennefer grabbed the rucksack and opened the pockets at the front to show her the carefully wrapped little glass bottles. “Your sword oils. And I put a bottle of contraceptive potion in the other pocket—three doses’ worth, just in case.”

“What?” Ciri laughed. “Don’t be silly, Mother. I’m only going for a book.”

Yennefer made a soft, skeptical sound at that. “If you haven’t had a single lover since you came back to the Continent, I’ll take it back and assume you’ve become a wandering, celibate hero out of Toussaintois legend for some reason. But if you have, then please be reasonable. You’re in no position to give me grandchildren.”

Ciri’s cheeks warmed. “A few,” she admitted. Brief encounters on the Path, a handful of men and women she’d passed the time with when she’d stayed in one place long enough to make a connection for longer than a few weeks.

“Hardly a cause for embarrassment, so long as you enjoyed yourself.” Yennefer buckled the pockets shut again and stood. “Three changes of clothes should suffice, I believe. Come, let’s sort through them together. And we’ll refresh your bandage after—it should be healing nicely with that ointment.”

Ciri smiled to herself and joined her in looking at the assembled clothes. “What’s wrong with what I usually wear?”

“Nothing, darling, if you want to look like a very fashion-forward bandit to the librarians at Oxenfurt Academy. Your clothes are twenty-seven years ahead of their time.”

She glanced down at her outfit and felt her smile twist wryly. It wasn’t an inaccurate description; her personal style as an adult had perhaps been unduly influenced by her time

with the Rats. But she loved her heeled boots and the jeweled belt she wore slung around the waist of her soft leather corset.

“Just more shirts and trousers like these,” she decided. “If I raise eyebrows, so be it.”

“You’re as bad as a sorceress,” Yennefer told her with mingled amusement and exasperation. ““So be it’ indeed.”

They set to work sorting and packing in companionable silence, taking turns placing neatly folded clothes in the open mouth of the rucksack.

A small smile tugged at Ciri’s lips again. She wouldn’t get *involved* in whatever had Geralt so worried. But she could at least find out who he meant when she got there. She had to, after all, in order to ‘make an impression’.

Even if getting the book proved futile, this was shaping up to be interesting.

Ciri stood out in the courtyard before the house, rucksack at her feet. Another night and a good portion of a day had passed, along with another vampire attack. Though Geralt and Yennefer bore it well, she could still see faint signs of exhaustion and soreness in their faces and how they held themselves.

She slid the scabbard of her silver sword from her sword belt and handed it over to Geralt reluctantly. “You should hold on to that for me,” she said. “And this.”

He accepted her witcher medallion, *Vesemir’s* witcher medallion, with a nod.

“There weren’t any lady witchers from the School of the Wolf before me,” Ciri said, trying to make the loss sit better. “And I don’t want to be too memorable.”

“They’ll be right here, waiting for your return,” he promised.

“Right.” She fixed her sword belt over her shoulder and across to the other side, snug against her ribs. *Zireael* lay comfortably on her back, the weight strangely light without its partner. At her hip, her coinpurse rested, full of copper farthings, pennies, and shillings, silver crowns, and gold sovereigns, all stamped with the face of a dead monarch.

The skin below her collarbone bore only a small bandage now, and beneath it lay a half-healed, deep pink line that would soon become her newest scar. Yennefer’s ointment always worked wonders.

“You might consider going by an alias while you’re there,” Yennefer suggested. “Who knows what Redanian intelligence might make of a woman with your name and looks appearing fully grown the year before your birth in Cintra?”

“Hopefully they’d write it off as a coincidence, but given everything that happened with Bonhart and Tawny Owl... Good idea,” Ciri said. “I’ll think of something.”

She picked up the rucksack and hoisted it onto her shoulder, drinking in the sight of her parents for a long moment. "I'll be back in a minute," she said. "You won't even have time to miss me."

"Not possible," Geralt said gruffly. "We always miss you when you're gone."

"Oh!"

She flung herself at them to hug them tightly, breathing in the mingled scent of Yennefer's lilac and gooseberry perfume and the slightly off-putting odor of harvested vampire parts coming off Geralt. Their arms pulled her in, warm and firm, and she closed her eyes and held on for just a moment.

Then just a moment longer.

Finally, she pulled away, and with a bright, reassuring smile just for them, she called up her magic and stepped from Corvo Bianco in twelve seventy-seven to Oxenfurt in twelve fifty.

A Chance Encounter

Chapter Notes

Beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

Content warning for this chapter: toward the end, a minor OC briefly attempts to sexually assault another minor OC. It's stopped, and the act and its consequences will be addressed in conversation in later chapters.

When the pale green glow of Ciri's magic faded, she found herself tucked behind a dilapidated warehouse. The pungent scent of fish and river mud filled her nose, and she pulled a face at the odor. She glanced about quickly to see if anyone had noticed her arrival. All seemed well, not another soul in sight behind the warehouse, so she slipped around the corner to head into the city.

The early evening sun shone down on the Pontar as she left the warehouses and neared the docks, painting everything a subtle shade of golden-pink and softening the crisp lines of the ships passing by. It was no port city like Novigrad, but merchant vessels still regularly stopped to unload their wares here. There was a demand for the exotic, curious, and artistic in Oxenfurt.

She passed a fishmonger expertly filleting and cleaning his catch and dredging the fillets in fine white flour. As she made her way past his stall, he looked up and aimed a gap-toothed grin at her, tossing a breaded fillet into a bubbling pan of oil. The mouthwatering scent that rose from it was nearly enough to chase the smell of the docks from her nose.

"Fresh fish, just caught this mornin'!" he caroled. "Buy yourself a nice supper, shilling a piece."

"I'll be sure to come back," Ciri said, walking on.

A short distance ahead, a young woman all in black stood before an easel, a painter's palette in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. At her side, a young man, likely a noble from the looks of his clothing, gave her an aggrieved look.

"Why do you always insist on coming here to paint?" he asked. He curled his lip and pointedly looked away from the docks where they stood. "We could go to the meadow by the Feuille farmstead again, if you like."

"Look at the light," the young woman said as she dabbed her brush across the canvas. "Isn't it splendid the way it makes everything glow?"

Now that Ciri had come closer, she could see the stress in the young woman's face, the faint sorrow. She was beautiful, green-eyed with a light flush to her cheeks and thick black hair drawn back in a braided bun. Not much older than Ciri.

"Iris..." the young man sighed.

His eyes were green as well, and his hair a match in color to hers. Her brother?

"Mm?" Iris replied.

"You can't keep coming out here hoping to run into him. It's done." He looked past Iris and glared at Ciri as he noticed her lingering. "Of all the—did that ruffian send you? Begone, scoundrel, and tell that louse the Bilewitz family is done with him."

Ciri held up her hands defensively. "No one sent me anywhere, but if I see any louses, I'll be sure to give them your regards."

"Then move along and stop eavesdropping," he ordered her.

Another playful quip rose to her lips, but she thought better of it and just shrugged and did as he demanded, striding up the docks toward the cobbled city street leading into Oxenfurt proper.

It only took a minute before the scent of the Pontar faded away, and Oxenfurt's unusually clean smell replaced it. The city was blessed with a robust sewer system and treatment plant thanks to the university—though admittedly the Cask, as the locals called it, did occasionally explode and spew excrement everywhere when the sediment trap failed. But most of the time Oxenfurt Academy's scientific advancements made for a very pleasant city.

And Oxenfurt itself was so lively! Stalls, inns, homes, taverns, and shops, all pressed together cheek to cheek, angling for space in a city that never seemed to rest. During the day trade bustled, with food and wares one might not find anywhere else in the Northern Kingdoms. And at night, drinks flowed freely, and the taverns filled with patrons looking to extend the day's entertainment long past the evening.

Ciri made her way through the streets, her eyes darting around to take it all in. It barely seemed any different than the last time she'd been here, though she knew it must have been much more subdued when Radovid had cracked down on Oxenfurt's scholars. But now, in the prime of King Vizimir's reign, the city blossomed.

She felt a faint twinge of hunger just as she laid eyes on her destination, and she hurried her steps to the door of the Alchemy Inn, the place Geralt had suggested she come first. A soft nickering caught her attention as she drew closer. She looked over curiously to see two particularly fine horses hitched to the railing just around the corner of the inn. The one nearest her was a powerfully built dapple gray gelding, his mane and tail nearly black, and his companion was a sleek strawberry roan with a white blaze and socks. Sitting idly on the rail and watching over them with a bored expression was a skinny child of middling years, a scuff of dirt on his rosy cheeks and wearing a tunic that had been washed so often she couldn't determine its color. She gave the horses a last admiring look and went inside.

The owner had a full, boisterous tavern, every table occupied. Several faces turned her way as she entered, curious to see who'd come to join them. Most looked back at their drinks or meals after a cursory glance. But the innkeeper set down the glass he was cleaning and leaned over the counter to call out to a table in the shadowy corner.

"Oi, von Everecs! Thought we agreed you'd keep your band out of my inn."

The tavern quieted, and a second later a man in a formal Redanian robe leaned out from the corner to give Ciri a long, slow look up and down. She looked right back at him, and he grinned boyishly, his light brown eyes glinting with good humor. He was a good-looking man, square-jawed and pale, with a nicely shaped nose and attractive, hooded eyes. He'd shaved most of his dark brown hair, leaving only a longish thatch on top to hang limply to the side.

"She's not one of ours, innkeep," the man called back. His eyes traveled her body again, and his grin grew. "I do believe I'd remember a jewel like her joining up."

From deeper in the corner, another voice spoke up, this one slightly harder and with a bit of a drawl to it. "I'm not so heartless as to ruin my favorite watering hole with that rabble, Stjepan. You needn't fear for the safety of your inn. They'll keep out."

"Fair enough," Stjepan said. "You're a man of your word." He jerked his chin at Ciri. "What can I get you?"

She wended her way through the crowded tavern tables as the patrons' attention fell off her again and the volume rose once more. Once belly-up to the counter, she rested her arms on it and leaned in so she could be heard.

"A pint of lager, please," she said, "and a plate of whatever's freshest."

"It's all fresh here, lass. What'll you have?"

The man who'd eyed her up spoke unexpectedly, and Ciri looked over to find him at her side.

"Two weeks ago, those two got into a brawl over his stuffed cabbage rolls. A tooth went flying." He laughed as she followed his finger to a pair of old men lost in their tankards. "I'd wager it's still wedged between the floorboards."

Ciri laughed back. "With that sort of recommendation, how can I resist?" She turned back to Stjepan. "The cabbage rolls, please."

He plunked her tankard of lager on the counter. "A crown and three shillings."

"And I'll need a room for the night," she added as she fished in her purse for the coins.

"I'm full up," he said with a shake of his head. "You'll have to try another inn."

Ciri frowned, and the man knocked on the counter before her with a broad hand.

“Plenty of other places to lay that pretty head of yours,” he said with a wink. “Join us at our table, if you like. No better company to be found in the Alchemy, I promise.”

He strolled away, whistling cheerfully, and Stjepan shook his head as Ciri handed over her coins.

“Dangerous men,” he commented. “Pay their tab, though.”

“You called them von Everecs?” Ciri asked. That sounded like an old noble surname.

“Brothers,” he said, turning away. “That was the younger one, Vlodimir. I’ll have your rolls out in a few minutes, lass. Expect I know where I’ll find you.”

Ciri took up her tankard and faced the crowded tavern again. Not a single space could be seen at any table, so full was the inn this evening. She hesitated a moment, then squared her shoulders and headed toward the shadowed table in the corner.

The brothers looked up as she sat down boldly at the end of the table with her rucksack beside her, leaving a generous space between herself and the von Everecs. Vlodimir greeted her with another grin. His older brother gave her a faint smile and a nod of welcome, his sea-blue eyes looking her over and lingering on the hilt and open pommel of her sword.

He didn’t look much like Vlodimir aside from the similar arresting eye shape. They were both good-looking men, broad-shouldered and brawny, but where Vlodimir seemed hewn from granite or oak, his brother was marble—sharper, polished, more refined. His jawline could cut glass, and his nose was straight and elegant. Like his brother, he’d shaved the sides of his deep red hair, but he’d left more on top, and it flopped to the side charmingly. He had a full, well-trimmed red moustache, and scattered all across his pale face were dozens and dozens of faint freckles. Unlike Vlodimir with his formal robe, he wore a plain white shirt, unlaced at the throat to reveal an expanse of hairy chest.

“Olgierd von Everec,” he said, reaching over the table to take her hand. “And my brother, Vlodimir.”

“Fiona,” Ciri introduced herself. Both brothers’ hands were strong and rough with calluses—from reins, she thought, or swords. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Your accent... You sound a bit Cintran, if I’m not mistaken.”

“For most of my childhood,” she said. “You have a good ear. Are you very well-traveled?”

“You meet all sorts here in Oxenfurt,” he replied, taking a sip from his tankard. A bit of foam stuck to his moustache when he pulled it away. “The Academy draws folk from every part of the Continent to our fair city. Cintrans included.”

“Olgierd attended the university,” Vlodimir said. He reached across the table to slap his brother’s arm. “Didn’t you say the lecturers were apt to drown in a rainstorm, they held their noses so high in the air?”

“Mm.” Olgierd let out a short, soft chuckle. “Arrogant, preening sods and dusty old bores.”

He didn't look anything like Ciri pictured when she thought of an Oxenfurt Academy graduate. Not with the gold ring in his ear and his shirt unlaced. When she pictured Oxenfurt Academy, she thought of Dandelion in all his finery, with his enthusiasm for poetry and song.

A serving girl came by and set Ciri's plate before her, handing her a knife and fork silently. Vlodimir leaned over to smile up at her, and the girl blushed and beat a hasty retreat.

"Interesting sword you have there," Olgierd said as Ciri dug into her meal. He gestured over her shoulder. "It's rare to see a human bearing a gnomish gwyhyr. Does it serve you well?"

"Mmf." Ciri swallowed her mouthful of cabbage roll. It had been a good recommendation on Vlodimir's part. "Very, thank you."

He patted an unseen sword at his hip. "My brother and I prefer sabers. But the gwyhyr is a fine choice."

"Gift from your father?" Vlodimir asked. He propped his elbow on the table to rest his chin on his fist and gave her a charming smile. "A sweetheart?"

Ciri made a reflexively sour face. "Nothing of the sort."

"Ah." Olgierd nodded in sharp approval. "Got it from an enemy, then. Well done."

Ciri smiled back and let him draw his own conclusions.

"Do you have a family name, Fiona of Cintra?" he asked.

She shook her head and took another bite of her meal to keep from saying any of the contradictory answers that rose to her lips. They were all much too revealing, and much too dangerous.

"No," she said when she'd finished another bite. "No family name, I'm afraid."

Vlodimir looked momentarily taken aback. Then he smiled again.

"A self-made woman!" he declared. "And not everyone can be noble. What would be the point of us if that were the case?"

Olgierd sighed and shook his head as Ciri laughed.

"You're nobles, then?" she asked. "'Von Everec'... that does sound like an old Redanian family name."

"One of its oldest and most prestigious," Vlodimir boasted. He deflated a little and cut a rueful look at Olgierd. "Though we've fallen into a bit of difficulty at the moment."

His brother snorted and took a long swallow from his tankard. "So, what brings you to Oxenfurt?" he asked Ciri in a blatant change of subject.

Ciri hesitated, and Vlodimir leaned closer with a glint in his eyes.

“Come now, moondrop. You can tell us. We’ve resources if you need a hand.”

She hid her laugh at the ridiculous endearment in her tankard, taking a long drink to give herself time to think. Her eyes went from brother to brother. What could their interest in helping her be when they’d only just met her? Stjepan had called them dangerous men. He’d mistaken her for one of their ‘band’, too.

Come to think of it, that wasn’t the only time she’d been mistaken for someone she wasn’t. Down on the docks, the nobleman with the artist sister had accused her of being sent by ‘that ruffian’. Olgierd and Vlodimir certainly qualified, even just by appearances.

And hadn’t Geralt told her she’d made an impression on a man with a brother? He’d told her not to get involved, but—here was a pair of brothers, offering to get involved themselves.

A vague answer ought to be relatively safe.

“My employer asked me to retrieve a manuscript from the Oxenfurt Academy library,” she told them. “A treatise on wards.”

“Well!” Vlodimir straightened, looking at her with keen interest. “Hired by a magic user. And no mere hedge-witch could afford your rates, I imagine.”

“I wouldn’t do it for just anyone,” Ciri said, and he nodded.

“Olgierd can escort you tomorrow,” he said, reaching across the table to smack his brother’s arm again. “He’ll see you to the library.”

Olgierd frowned at him, and Vlodimir gave him a look Ciri couldn’t quite interpret.

“It’ll be a nice break from your concerns,” Vlodimir added. “And it’s no hardship to show a beautiful woman around Oxenfurt.”

“Vlod.” Olgierd’s frown deepened.

Vlodimir leaned in, undaunted. “A nice stroll through those elven parks, enjoying the scenery... and the scenery.”

Ciri restrained herself from rolling her eyes as both brothers’ gazes flickered over her at Vlodimir’s words.

A sharp bark of laughter escaped Olgierd. “You dog.” He turned to Ciri, faint resignation written across his face. “I can spare the morning to aid you. After that—”

“Yes, yes,” Vlodimir interrupted. “Never a moment’s rest with you. Which one is it this time? The usurer by the docks, or the moneylender near the art gallery?”

Olgierd shot his brother a forbidding look and jerked his head at Ciri. “Less of the jabber.”

Vlodimir gave Ciri a sidelong glance and smiled ruefully. “Apologies, muffin. Shouldn’t be airing the family laundry.”

Ciri bit back a smile. ‘Muffin’? She was starting to wonder what other absurd endearments he thought passed for flirtation.

“You don’t need to take me tomorrow,” she told Olgierd. “If you have other matters you need to take care of, I’m fine going on my own. Truly.”

“Nay,” Olgierd said, his hard expression fading. “It’s as Vlodimir says. We could hardly leave a newcomer to the city to struggle on her own, not when we could lend a hand.”

Ciri took another sip of her lager. “That’s kind of you.”

“Oh, we’re the very definition of kindness,” Vlodimir said with another charming smile.

Given Stjepan’s warning, and the words of the nobleman down at the docks, Ciri had her doubts. But still, the brothers seemed nice enough.

“I’ve an excellent idea,” Vlodimir continued. “You need a bed for the night, don’t you? Come back to the inn where we’re staying. There’s sure to be room for you.”

Ciri finished off the last of her supper as she considered the offer. It would be easier to head out in the morning with Olgierd if they were already together. But Geralt’s warning to not get involved nagged at her. Letting them help her briefly tomorrow was one thing, but going back with them to where they lodged seemed like the sort of thing that might make him complain about gray hair again.

“Where is it?” she asked. “The inn you’re staying at.”

“The Black Mare,” Olgierd said. He gestured with a tilt of his head. “It’s located on the outskirts of the city, where there’s land enough for a full-sized stable. Travelers often make use of it if they’re just passing by. Most prefer to lodge in Oxenfurt proper, where they can enjoy what the city has to offer.”

“And you needed an inn with a stable?” She sat forward in interest. “Are those your horses outside? They’re beautiful.”

“Ah, you saw Barghest and Falka!” Vlodimir interjected. “No finer mounts to be had on this side of the Pontar.”

Ciri looked at him curiously, suppressing a twitch at the mention of the name she’d been a bandit under. “You named your horse after a bloodthirsty Redanian princess who tried to usurp the throne?”

He gave her another boyish grin. “I’ve an appreciation for a fierce woman. My Falka lives up to her name, all fire and sparks at a gallop. Fine lines to her, as well: long legs, a strong back, a sturdy rump—I’ve never had a better mount.”

She was certain she’d never heard a horse described with quite that much innuendo in the tone of voice before.

“I’m sure you ride her well,” she said with a laugh.

Vlodimir sat back in surprise, his grin growing. “Ha!”

“I’ll go with you,” she decided. “Thank you for the offer.”

Olgierd nodded at her empty plate and tankard. “Finished?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’d best head out.” He stood from the table, looming above her for a moment and revealing the unseen saber.

Ciri’s eyes widened as she caught sight of the wood and brass hilt. She’d seen that hilt before on the saber hanging on Corvo Bianco’s wall.

These two were, without a doubt, the men Geralt had warned her away from. The ones who would tell him about her in the future.

“Like it?” Olgierd asked. He patted his saber again.

“The detail on the hilt is exquisite,” Ciri said as she and Vlodimir stood as well. “It looks old. An heirloom?”

“An Ofieri relic,” Olgierd explained briefly. “It’s been in the family for generations. Serves me as well as your gwyhyr, I expect.”

He raised his eyebrows fractionally as she scooped up her rucksack and came around the table to stand closer.

“You’re a tall one, aren’t you?” He looked down at her feet and a crooked smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Ha.”

It was true; she was a tall woman to begin with, and with the added height the boots gave her, she stood at eye level with most men. The brothers had several inches on her, though—Olgierd was of a height with Geralt, and Vlodimir was even taller.

“As tall and shapely as a willow tree,” Vlodimir praised her. He grinned. “Men must gather beneath your lush limbs to... admire your beauty.”

Ciri buried her face in her free hand and snickered. “First horses, now trees,” she giped. “I’m starting to wonder at your preferences.”

Another startled bark of laughter escaped Olgierd, and he tossed an arm around his brother’s shoulders and steered him toward the door. “That’s enough from you for one night. Come, back to the inn. Gods only know what those louts got up to in our absence.”

“We did tell them not to burn this one down, didn’t we?” Ciri heard Vlodimir ask Olgierd in an undertone as she followed them out of the Alchemy Inn. “We don’t have the funds to buy off the innkeeper—”

“I told them.”

That sounded ominous. What sort of ‘band’ did they have that arson was a concern?

The boy on the railing looked up as they came out, and he held out a grubby hand in expectation. Olgierd dug into the purse on his belt and pulled out a penny.

“No one touched them?” he asked, holding the coin out of reach.

The boy shook his head vigorously. “Nossir! Told a snooper ‘twere yours, and off he went like the devil bit him.”

The coin dropped squarely into the small, dirty palm.

“Good lad,” Olgierd said. “Off you run now.”

The boy scampered down the street into the fading light, the bustle of Oxenfurt’s evening merrymaking swiftly swallowing him from view.

The brothers unhitched their horses from the railing and turned as one to look at Ciri. Vlodimir shook his head.

“Much as I’d enjoy the feel of those supple arms around my waist,” he began.

Ciri scoffed, and he grinned at her.

“Falka won’t carry double,” he continued. “She’ll buck if we try.”

“Barghest won’t mind the extra passenger,” Olgierd said. “Iris has ridden pillion with me a dozen times. He’s accustomed to it.”

Iris? The woman from the docks? The elegant, artistic noblewoman seemed an odd match for Olgierd, though she had suspected a connection. She decided discretion was the better choice and didn’t ask, instead choosing to look Barghest over.

There was no pillion saddle in sight. Ciri’s eyes lit on the bedroll that lay across the back of his horse, and she shrugged. She’d had worse experiences than an uncomfortable ride.

Vlodimir swung up into Falka’s saddle gracefully and landed there like he’d been born in it. Olgierd followed suit, looking just as natural and at ease as his brother. He leaned down and held out a hand to Ciri to help her up.

“I won’t bite,” he said mildly, patting her knee as she settled onto the bedroll behind him. “Get closer and put your arms about me. It wouldn’t do to lose you halfway there.”

She scooted closer and loosely wrapped her arms around his middle, acutely aware of just how warm he was, and how firm he felt beneath her hands. She felt his legs move in front of hers as his heels lightly touched Barghest’s sides. The dapple-gray gelding started to walk, and she tightened her grip.

“Apologies for the discomfort,” he said. “We’ll be there soon.”

“It’s no trouble,” she assured him. “Thank you for taking me.”

“Oh, our pleasure, snowberry,” Vlodimir called out from behind them as they forded their way through the crowded streets.

She sighed at his nonsense and just held on, trying not to think anything inappropriate about the man in front of her and his warm, very firm body.

A boisterous cry of welcome went up as Olgierd and Vlodimir came through the door of the Black Mare, along with a stray whistle and rude proposition when Ciri followed behind. Olgierd waved a hand at them in acknowledgment, and as he and his brother stepped farther inside, Ciri finally got a glimpse of the band she kept hearing about.

Nearly a dozen and a half men and women spread out around the common area of the inn, taking up the tables and lounging against the walls or on the floor. Most were dressed in billowing white shirts or sleeveless jerkins, with dark trousers and sturdy boots that had seen quite a bit of wear. Many had a handful or more of visible tattoos, crude ones in black ink of naked women or simple designs, and some had rings on their fingers or in their ears. All of the men and a few of the women had their heads shaved like the von Everec brothers.

A faint haze of smoke hung in the air, and spilled alcohol gave the inn a seedy, down-market smell. She wrinkled her nose and tried not to stiffen as a hard, sharp scent reached her. Someone had fisstech.

She hung back by the door with a bit of unease, watching as the band returned to their revelry. Drinks flowed; conversation started and stopped and picked up again. Someone would make a reference or ape a reaction and the others would burst into raucous laughter. There in the corner, a woman leaned back against the wall, moaning, as a man propped himself up beside her to work his hand in her trousers and lay kisses on her neck.

“Always those two,” Vlodimir laughed, seeing where Ciri was looking. He raised his voice to call out over the ruckus. “Put your back into it, Martyn, I can hardly hear her!”

The woman made a rude gesture over Martyn’s shoulder.

Ciri looked away, her gaze traveling the room again. At one table, three men and a woman played a dice game, a modest pile of coins and jewelry heaped in the center between them. And sitting beneath the table, his eyes shining with the high of fisstech, a man spun a dagger between his fingers.

Another natural lull fell in the laughter and conversation. A small, soft noise drew her attention to the far end of the room. Ciri went rigid as she spotted the source. One of the tattooed, burly men had an arm around what looked like the inn’s maid, laughing, his hands wandering her chest and stomach while she tried in vain to pull away.

Olgierd followed her gaze this time, and he snapped out, “Vlodimir. Deal with that. Whoreson’s been warned once.”

Vlodimir clapped his brother on the shoulder and strode across the room, his face hard and devoid of all its boyish joviality from earlier.

“Let’s see about getting you a room,” Olgierd said, turning back to Ciri. He walked off toward the counter, and all Ciri could do was follow him, desperate to race ahead of Vlodimir and tear the man off the maid.

The woman sitting behind the counter was gray-haired and pink-cheeked, with a stoutness to her body that spoke as much of hard work as it did of good meals. She looked up at Olgierd from her stool with resigned brown eyes and sighed.

“Another one, sir?”

“She’s not one of mine,” he said. He gave Ciri a long look and added, “She is my guest, however. And as her host, I’d like to ensure her stay here is comfortable. I don’t suppose you might find accommodation for her tonight?”

The innkeeper sniffed. “I reserved a few beds for couriers and tradesfolk, but if she must stay here—”

Olgierd set his hand on the counter and leaned in just the slightest bit. “Then there’s a room on offer, and a courier can go begging.”

“We do have a room,” the innkeeper agreed swiftly. She ducked beneath the counter to rustle for something, and Ciri heard her mutter to herself, “...what happened to the Three Dogs...”

Olgierd’s lips quirked in something that wasn’t quite a smile.

A clamor arose behind them, and Ciri jerked around to see Vlodimir hauling the tattooed man toward the door, his arm wrapped around the man’s neck in a tight headlock. The man flailed and punched at his stomach and sides, but on Vlodimir went, relentlessly dragging him out, ignoring his sputtered protests.

The door slammed shut behind them, and after several seconds of silence, revelry resumed. Ciri looked toward the far end of the common room and saw the inn’s maid standing alone staring at the door in mingled fear and relief, her arms wrapped around herself as her mussed blonde curls fell across her face. Something in Ciri’s stomach unclenched at the sight.

“There we are,” Olgierd said in satisfaction. “Your girl is safe now, innkeep.”

“She’d be safer if you took your rogues and left,” the innkeeper said tartly. She handed over a key and sat back down on her stool. “Room twelve, at the end of the hall on the second floor.”

“One door down from Vlodimir’s and my room,” Olgierd said, holding out the key to Ciri. He dropped a silver crown on the counter before the innkeeper. “I’ll show you the way.”

Ciri fell in behind him again, returning curious, leering looks with a level stare of her own and brushing off scattered lewd invitations with a toss of her head. He led her past his

merrymaking, drunken band to the stairs at the far end of the room, and as they proceeded up them, the sound fell off dramatically.

“So... your band,” Ciri began.

“Cutthroats and scoundrels, the lot of them,” Olgierd said with a casual gesture. “Good for a laugh, excellent in a fight.”

“Are you bandits?”

He paused on the stairs and looked over his shoulder at her. “Bandits? Believe my brother and I told you we were noblemen.”

“Then you have very unconventional family retainers,” Ciri retorted.

His broad shoulders jerked with suppressed laughter, and he turned back around to continue up the stairs. “Raiding and marauding is the von Everec family legacy. We’ve plans to turn our little band into a free company soon.”

A free company was barely better in Ciri’s book: a royal charter giving men and women leave to commit all sorts of terrible acts in wartime under the guise of legitimacy. Still bandits, in her opinion.

But they’d stopped one of their band from assaulting the maid—Kayleigh wouldn’t have flinched at rape, and neither would Mistle.

But they’d burned down a different inn—the Rats hadn’t committed arson.

But Olgierd and Vlodimir had been so charming and welcoming at the Alchemy Inn—strangely so, now that she thought about it.

Conflicted, a bit suspicious, and irritated to find herself still liking the brothers despite her best instincts, she kept silent.

The staircase emptied out into a dim, narrow hall lined with sturdy doors, and she followed him to the end. He stopped at a door with a blocky “12” carved into it at eye level and stepped aside.

“We’re just there, in room ten. Shout if anything’s amiss. I doubt my lads will bother you during the night, but feel free to teach them some manners if they do.”

Ciri set her hand on her purse, and he shook his head.

“Nay. You’re our guest, as I said. Save your coin.” He turned to head back down the hall and stopped as if a thought had just occurred to him. “Though perhaps you might join us downstairs after you settle in. Have a drink with us, share a story or two.”

“Perhaps,” Ciri said. “It’s been a long day.”

“Plenty of time to get to know them later,” he said. “Until tomorrow, then.”

Ciri let herself into room twelve as he walked off down the hall, and she shut the door firmly behind her. The room was small and clean, dimly lit, with a modest window high up on the wall letting in faint moonlight. A crisply made full-sized bed covered by a faded blue blanket took up most of the space, with a bedstand beside it and an empty washbasin standing along the far wall.

She dropped her rucksack on the floor next to the bed and sat on its edge to tug her boots off. Once her feet were freed, she unbuckled her sword belt and flopped down on the bed to stare up at the ceiling.

This had become much more complicated than she'd anticipated.

Awful, Likable Men

Chapter Notes

beta-read by brightspot149—thank you!

Ciri opened her eyes to a strange ceiling.

For just a moment confusion passed over her, and she sat up abruptly, tossing the covers back. The sight of her rucksack by the bed brought her instantly back to the present—or rather, back to the past.

The strange ceiling belonged to room twelve of the Black Mare, on the outskirts of Oxenfurt in twelve-fifty. The inn was chock full of what would undoubtedly be hungover bandits, as well as a pair of strangely hospitable brothers who'd given her an unexpected promise of aid.

Vlodimir had offered up Olgierd's time and services to her this morning. She'd be able to get to the university library today.

She hurried out of bed to dress. The sooner she dealt with the manuscript and returned to her own time, the better.

Vlodimir spotted her first as she descended the stairs into the common area, and he raised an arm to wave at her, gesturing her over to the half-full table where he and Olgierd sat eating with two other members of their band. He moved a seat down so she could sit between them, and she dropped into the space between him and Olgierd.

"Am I still dreaming?" Vlodimir asked, reaching for a heavy carafe to pour her a cup of coffee. "Or have the splendors of last night followed me into my waking hours?"

Ciri made a face at him. "It's too early for your silliness. Try again after I've had a bite to eat."

On her other side, Olgierd lifted a hand at the passing maid to beckon her to their table. "Some food for our guest, dear."

The maid cast a wary glance over the table's occupants, and Ciri gave her a reassuring smile that didn't seem to help. She bobbed a quick curtsy to Olgierd and hurried off.

Ciri looked around the room. She didn't see the man Vlodimir had dragged out last night anywhere. But she certainly couldn't blame the girl for still being afraid.

"Who's this, then?" the only other woman at the table asked, half slumped over her plate of eggs and sausage. Her thick brown braid threatened to fall into her food. She slurped from

her cup and eyed Ciri with a bleary gaze that couldn't disguise her interest.

"You heard him," said the heavily tattooed man beside her, pointing at Ciri with his fork. "She's their *guest*."

The woman snickered and nudged him, and she opened her mouth to say something only to be cut off by Olgierd.

"You heard correctly. And you'll make her feel right comfortable among us for her stay, won't you?"

"We'll be properly hospitable," the man agreed. He raised his cup in a wordless toast.

The woman slurped from her cup again and looked between Ciri and the brothers.

"Oh, aye," she said belatedly. "Proper hosts, that's us."

Olgierd gave them a stern look, then turned to Ciri. "Now's as fine a time as any to meet a few of our band. Fiona, Stefan and Lidia. You two, Fiona."

An ingrained, mindless courtesy almost spilled from Ciri's lips before she thought better of it and just nodded to them firmly, looking them in the eye. A glimmer of approval went through Stefan's gaze. Lidia smirked and nodded back.

The maid returned with a plate of gently steaming scrambled eggs and sausage and a roll smeared with jam. She set it in front of Ciri without a word, hastily retreating from the table as soon as it was out of her hand. Ciri watched her scurry back to the kitchen and turned to Vlodimir.

"Where's the man who was harassing her last night?"

"Borys?" Vlodimir laughed. "He felt a pressing need to travel south. I hadn't the heart to stop him."

That seemed unlikely. But she wasn't much interested in where Borys had truly ended up, not when she was still tired and hadn't had breakfast yet. She turned her attention to her plate and cup of coffee instead of prying further. It was a rare treat to have coffee on the Path, and a full carafe on the table seemed like an outrageous luxury, even in a university city like Oxenfurt. She wouldn't squander the opportunity to enjoy it.

"Not riding out today, are we?" Stefan asked Olgierd as Ciri quietly ate and drank.

"Nay. A week, perhaps a bit more."

"Only the lads are getting restless—"

"He said a week," Vlodimir interrupted. "Clean out your ears."

Lidia drained her cup to the dregs and nudged Stefan again. "We still have coin from our last"—her eyes flickered to Ciri—"ride out. There's fun to be had in Oxenfurt. Dice, a round

of cards, a whore or two. Taverns aplenty.”

“Aye,” Stefan said. He stood from the table and inclined his head to Olgierd. “I’ll go tell the others the plan.”

“My plan,” Lidia scoffed, standing as well. “I’ll tell them.”

The two went off squabbling amiably, and Ciri was left alone with the brothers.

Vlodimir set his elbow on the table and half-turned to face her.

“Rough pursuits, but they keep the band amused,” he dismissed. His eyes did another slow drag up and down, ending on her face. “But you wouldn’t be satisfied with dicing or gwent, would you, petal? No, you’ve a rare beauty, a poise meant for finer things than gambling halls.”

Ciri set down her fork and suppressed a smile. “Go on.”

On her other side, Olgierd sighed.

“I could treat you to true luxury, show you off at Novigrad’s most exclusive salons,” he said, leaning in. “You and I, arm and arm, could see delights and wonders from all over the Continent. What do you say?”

“I say I prefer your innuendo,” Ciri said dryly. “It was more honest.”

A soft snort escaped Olgierd at Vlodimir’s affronted expression. “Vlod. You can’t treat a well-traveled, capable woman as you would some doe-eyed virgin who’s not set foot off her father’s farm.”

Vlodimir reached past Ciri to lightly shove Olgierd’s shoulder. “I’d like to see you do better.”

Olgierd sighed again and turned in his seat toward Ciri. She shifted to face him, and he gave her a half-smile and extended his hand.

“May I?”

She set her hand in his upturned palm with a mix of amusement and curiosity. Her stomach gave an unexpected flutter as he gently closed his callused fingers around hers and lifted her knuckles to his lips in a barely felt kiss, his moustache tickling her skin. He pulled her hand away but kept hold, his eyes gazing deeply into hers.

“Sweet Fiona,” he said, his words low and intimate. “You’ve but to ask, and your travels will be mine as well. Whether it’s rugged Temeria or exotic Zangvebar, I wish nothing more than to journey through life with you, sword in hand.”

Her breath caught despite the game, and he smiled slightly at her reaction.

“Days of seeking new thrills together,” he continued, “and nights spent in ecstasy by campfires or in roadside inns. Grant me a minute of one of your days, and then a minute

more, until all our minutes have added together into a lifetime of adventure. Just us and the open road, my dear, with naught to tie us back.”

Ciri’s cheeks flooded with heat. He winked at her and gave her hand a friendly squeeze before letting go.

“There, you see?” he said, leaning around her.

“Oh, you’re both awful,” Ciri muttered. She pressed her hands to her burning face.

Vlodimir slapped his knee and laughed loudly. “Don’t take it to heart, dewdrop. He’s tweaking my nose, not yours.”

She took a healthy swallow of her coffee to drown the traitorous butterflies fluttering there and forcibly changed the subject.

“When would you like to go to the university?” She cocked her head at Olgierd. “I can’t imagine you want me to ride pillion again.”

“Once you’ve finished your meal,” he said. “And you’re free to take Borys’ mare if you like.”

“He decided to travel south on foot?” she asked. She could hear the skepticism thick in her voice. “How far south did he travel, exactly?”

Vlodimir gave her an evaluating look before answering. “About six feet.”

“Man violated the chivalric code twice,” Olgierd added. “There are consequences for such misbehavior.”

Ciri paused, her fork hovering above her eggs. On either side of her, the brothers waited quietly for her reaction, both completely at ease.

There had been a murder last night—at best, a summary execution. Playful, flirtatious Vlodimir had killed a man on Olgierd’s orders.

And yet, given the skittishness of the inn’s maid this morning, Ciri couldn’t find it in herself to care all that much for Borys’ fate. A part of her even respected the decision.

“Six feet ought to be deep enough to keep necrophages from digging him up,” she said, scooping up another forkful of eggs and sausage.

“Ha!” Vlodimir nodded at his brother.

Olgierd made a quiet sound of agreement and nodded at Ciri’s cup. “More coffee?”

“Mm. No thank you.” She polished off the last of her breakfast and took a final swig from her cup. “Shall we head off?”

“As you like.” He stood from the table and looked over her head at Vlodimir. “We ought to be back by lunch, perhaps shortly after. Going into town with the others?”

“I might.” Vlodimir drummed his fingers on the table and added, “Only for a short jaunt if I do. I’ll be here when you return.”

“Then we’ll be seeing you.”

“Until our next meeting, blossom!” Vlodimir called after Ciri as she followed Olgierd out of the inn.

Outside, the morning sun was clear and bright, and the soft blue sky held scattered, wispy clouds. Ciri glanced around the packed dirt yard and spotted a darker patch of disturbed earth in the far corner. A short trip south, indeed. She looked away from the unmarked grave and searched for a safe subject to talk about.

“Is your brother always such an incorrigible flirt?”

Olgierd let out a brief chuckle. “There’s a good word for it. Turns into a right idiot around a woman. Does it bother you? Say the word and he’ll leave you be.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Ciri said. “It’s funny.”

He shook his head in amused agreement and pushed open the stable doors. Long faces with velvety noses and dark, liquid eyes swung over the stalls at the sound of their entrance to peer at them, nickering quietly. Ciri spotted Barghest and Falka halfway down the row; the two of them were easily the finest horses in the stable.

Olgierd grabbed a lead from the wall and led her down to the far end of the stable. He clicked his tongue at a glossy black mare with a thick, silky mane who eagerly stuck her head over the stall door at them to sniff at them both.

“Apologies, sweetheart,” he said, rubbing her nose. “No treats for you this time.”

“She’s gorgeous,” Ciri breathed. She reached out to let the mare get a good whiff of her hand, then rubbed her graceful neck. “What’s her name?”

“Daft whoreson wanted to call this beauty Trampler,” he said. “Luckily, she only responds to the name her first owner gave her. Umbra.”

“Umbra,” Ciri echoed. “I had a black mare named Kelpie when I was younger. And my last mare, Nadir, was black as well. She died a few days ago.”

“My condolences,” he said gravely. “The loss of a horse is no small thing. Old age, I hope? Not injury?”

She shook her head. “A monster got her.”

He gestured to his collarbone. “Your bandage—were you injured in the attack?”

“Only a little,” Ciri dismissed. “A witcher killed it in the end.”

“Won’t bring your horse back.” He let out a disapproving huff and gave Umbra a pat on the neck. “She’s yours to ride for as long as you stay with us.”

“Thank you.”

More of the von Everecs’ famed ‘hospitality’, she assumed. It was incredibly generous to loan her such a fine horse, even just for the day. But there was something slightly off about it, like there was a hook or a burr buried beneath the attractive surface.

Olgierd unlatched the stall door and hooked the lead to Umbra’s halter. He handed it over to Ciri and turned to walk back toward the stable doors again.

“Her tack’s over here,” he said. “I assume you know your way around a bridle and bit?”

Ciri shot a look of disbelief at his back, and he must have taken her silence as an answer because he chuckled again.

“I’ll leave you to it, then. Here you are.” He pointed to a saddle and blanket lying over a rack and the tack hanging neatly on the wall beside it. “I won’t be but a few minutes.”

She reached for the blanket as he went back up the rows to fetch Barghest. “Come on, pretty girl,” she murmured to Umbra. “Let’s get you ready for a nice outing.”

Umbra blew warm air at her and lipped at the collar of her shirt, and Ciri smiled. They’d get along fine, hidden catch or not.

Olgierd drew Barghest to a gentle halt as they reached the end of the bridge to the Philosophers’ Gate. Ciri followed suit, looking over at him curiously.

“We’ll leave the horses with a groom here,” he told her. “See that man in the booth just there? We can’t get in without signing the guest book.”

Ciri followed his gesture to see a man snoozing beneath a floppy cloth hat, the decorative feather rising and falling with his breath. He hugged a thick book to his ample stomach as he snuggled deeper into his chair, a snore escaping him every so often.

“This is their security?” she asked.

“The Redanian army had guards posted here until a few years ago,” he said as he dismounted. “You would have been a teenager when the students rebelled against the crown. Dragged the city into their idiocy. It’s only recently gone back to the way it ought to be. Hey!”

He rapped on the booth. The dozing man gave a jolt of surprise, the book almost slipping from his grasp as his hand flew to his head.

Ciri slid from Umbra’s saddle and joined him at the booth window.

“Melitele’s mercy!” the man gasped. “I’ve a delicate constitution, sir. You can’t just wake a man like that.”

Olgierd snorted. “I can smell your delicate constitution from here. Two to sign the guest book, and then you can sleep off your hangover as long as you like.”

The man huffed in indignation, but he handed over the book and fished out a bottle of ink and a quill from the recesses of the booth for them as well. Olgierd cracked open the book and flipped to the first empty page, and he offered it to Ciri. She darted a glance at the previous entries, then bit her lip and looked over at Olgierd.

“What’s the date today?”

“Lost track out there on your own?” he asked. “It’s the eighth.”

Fiona, Ciri wrote. *8 April 1250. Library.* “Thank you.”

She passed the quill to him, and he jotted down his own entry in an elegant hand. *Olgierd von Everec, Art History 1237, 8 April 1250. Library.*

“You attended thirteen years ago?” Ciri asked as he handed the book back to the hungover man in the booth.

“Graduated thirteen years ago. I attended when I was seventeen and thought I knew everything.” He gave her a half-smile. “I knew enough to get myself in trouble for mouthing back at the professors about painting and sculpture, and little more.”

They led the horses past the booth and into the grounds of Oxenfurt Academy, where a waiting groom jumped up from a bench and rushed to intercept them.

“No, *no*, absolutely no horses on the foot paths!”

Olgierd surrendered Barghest’s reins into the groom’s impatient hands and gestured for Ciri to do the same with Umbra.

“Give them water and something to eat,” he ordered the groom. “We’ll return for them shortly.”

The groom gave them a dubious look, his eyes narrowing as they passed over Ciri’s scar and Olgierd’s gold earring. “Very well. Behave yourselves.”

“I believe that little prick just mistook us for bandits,” Olgierd said quietly as the groom walked off. Anger simmered in his voice. “Were he armed I might demand satisfaction for the insult.”

Ciri shrugged. Yennefer had warned her, after all.

“So? We do look rather... roguish,” she said. “Show me to the library?”

She looked at him expectantly. The tension went out of his shoulders, and he swept his hand before them at the campus.

“Right this way.”

The university campus was a world removed from the tightly packed bustle of Oxenfurt just over the bridge. It was just as the elves had built it before the humans had taken it, all wide, colorful gravel paths and delicate open fences, fragrant flower beds, neat hedgerows, and green parks, crossed every so often with flowing canals and waterways. Each building was an artfully crafted little palace of gray stonework and tall, arched windows. He led her past students studying on benches and professors strolling together with their heads bent in conversation, down one path and then another, until they ended up in front of one of the buildings.

“The library,” he said, holding open the door for her. “Let’s see if we can’t get your manuscript for you.”

Only two people were present in the library’s foyer when they entered. The student in the armchair, half-hidden behind a massive book, peeked up in vague interest and returned to her reading after giving them a brief glance. The other woman jumped up from her seat behind a small, book-covered desk and hurried over, wringing her thin, pale hands.

“Can I help you two? Are you lost?”

“We’re right where we mean to be,” Olgierd said with an edge of irritation. “We’ve come for a book.”

The woman’s nervously shifting hands went still for a moment, and she clenched them together tightly. “Our library is the jewel of Oxenfurt Academy, full of delicate, ancient texts and priceless tomes. We can’t lend our books out to just *anyone*!”

“And were I just anyone, there might be merit to your words,” Olgierd said. “As it happens, I’m an alumnus of this fine academy. And we’ve come for a book. Fiona?”

Ciri stepped forward. “I’m looking for Melchior Fabin’s unpublished manuscript on vampire-repelling wards.”

The woman stared at her, her eyebrows slowly rising. Ciri stared back steadily.

“Melchior Fabin’s manuscript?” She looked Ciri over. Skepticism shone clear in her eyes. “How unusual. Wait here. I’ll need to consult with our head librarian.”

She hurried off to the door at the end of the foyer and closed it firmly behind her, leaving Ciri and Olgierd alone with the student absorbed in her reading.

“Vampire-repelling wards,” Olgierd said, a note of keen interest in his voice. “Quite a strange area of study your employer has.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Ciri sighed.

She took a seat on the low red velveteen couch against the wall and looked up at Olgierd. “I expect she’ll be a while.”

“I don’t doubt it,” he said, but he didn’t join her. He walked a short distance away to look out the window instead.

Ciri cast an admiring glance at his tall, sturdy figure, her gaze lingering on his broad shoulders and the strong planes of his back beneath his white shirt. His eyes caught hers in the window’s reflection, and she felt her cheeks heat again as his lips twitched in a small smile.

“Do you always flirt with strange women when your brother tells you to?” she asked, wrestling down her embarrassment.

“You don’t have siblings, do you?” he said in response. “We’re always egging each other on—tweaking each other’s noses, as he said. Regardless, I apologize for putting you in the middle of it. I meant nothing by it.”

Ciri didn’t know why she found that disappointing. She was only going to be here for another hour or two at best, a day at most, and he was more than a bit of a scoundrel. And he had mentioned an Iris before, likely the noblewoman from the docks yesterday. Of course he hadn’t been flirting in earnest.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I didn’t think you did.”

She cast around for something else to discuss. “It’s quite a leap from art history to...”

She trailed off uncertainly with a sidelong glance at the intently reading student.

“‘Unconventional family retainers’?” he supplied with a faint smirk.

“Yes.”

“I’m a great admirer of the arts,” he said. “The artist’s unceasing pursuit of beauty, the sculptor’s drive to immortalize a single moment in time, the poet’s exquisite turn of phrase. The need to hone and perfect their craft. But admiration of art lacks in challenge, in excitement.”

Ciri bit back incredulous laughter. “You mean to say it’s because you get bored easily?”

“Call it a personal failing. And I did mention the family legacy.” He fell silent for a moment, then added, “My Iris is a talented artist. Her way with color and light rivals the old masters. Landscapes, portraiture... I daresay none are her equal.”

The clear affection and pride with which he spoke struck Ciri broadside, and the pieces that made up Olgierd von Everec shifted and rearranged themselves slightly as she watched his face grow tender in the window’s reflection. He seemed to be a man who was deeply in love, questionable acts or not. A moment’s regret washed over her for her disappointment that he wasn’t taken with her.

Ciri was transitory. Her interest was passing. She had no claim to his affections.

“She sounds wonderful,” Ciri said, and she meant it.

“She’s a gem.”

The tenderness fell from his face abruptly as he caught sight of something out the window. He stiffened, his hand dropping to the hilt of his saber. His knuckles went white around it.

“That whoreson,” he growled under his breath.

Ciri jumped to her feet to join him at the window. She spotted what caught his attention at once: three young men passing by, dressed in the style of the Redanian upper class. Two of them had the pale complexion of locals and looked to be Ciri’s age or a bit younger. The third was slightly older, a handsome man in his late twenties with neat black facial hair and light brown skin.

Ciri grabbed his arm as he shot toward the door, and he jerked to a halt with a fearsome glare.

“You’ll want to take your hand off me,” he said levelly. “I’ve a score to settle with that dog out there. It’s a matter of honor.”

“This is a university campus and all three of those men are unarmed,” Ciri shot back, not letting go. “Whatever you intend, it would be murder.”

“Righteous vengeance is never murder.”

Ciri startled as the student in the corner slammed her massive book shut and scuttled past them out the door with it tucked to her chest. Olgierd glanced out the window again and let out a low, irritated sound of discontent.

“Bloody hell. There he goes.”

He pulled his arm from her grasp more gently than she expected and sat heavily on the couch, his head in his hands. Ciri hesitated for a second then sat beside him.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“The Ofieri?” His short, soft laugh was pained and humorless. “That conniving bastard started paying court to my Iris months ago, long before my family ran into any trouble. Once her parents broke our engagement, he was at their doorstep with his suit. They leapt for it like dogs salivating over a meaty bone. Man’s a prince back in his homeland, or so Iris wrote to tell me.”

That would be the ‘bit of difficulty’ Vlodimir had mentioned over supper yesterday, no doubt, along with the references to visiting moneylenders that Olgierd had forcefully cut off. The von Everecs had money troubles, then, enough so that Iris’ parents had broken their engagement over it.

Geralt's warning echoed through her mind again, and she silently cursed the unfairness of it all. He knew! He knew she'd want to help. But—

He had Olgierd's saber on his wall. He'd met one of the brothers.

That had to mean Olgierd and Vlodimir would solve their problem somehow. Although hadn't Geralt also mentioned attention from a being that was 'evil incarnate'? Her chest tightened at the thought of them getting wrapped up in a predicament like that.

"I'm sorry," she said. The words felt hopelessly inadequate.

He lifted his head from his hands and gave it a firm shake, patting her absently just above her knee.

"He'll get what's coming to him," he said. "Enough of this. Too much talk of honorless curs will spoil the day."

They both looked up as the door at the end of the foyer opened again, and the woman with the thin, nervous hands came out once more. She shut the door behind her and took a deep breath, eyeing Ciri and Olgierd warily.

"Forgive me for stating the obvious, but I see no book on your person," Olgierd said.

"Ah—yes. Well." The woman shrank into herself, then straightened her spine and put her hands down. "There are... irregularities... in loaning out that particular manuscript. Our head librarian will review your request and give it all due consideration, and you may return here for his answer later."

"Later!" Ciri exclaimed, rising to her feet.

The woman's hands rose along with Ciri, giving one anxious wring in front of her chest before hastily falling back to her sides.

"Later," she repeated. She darted a nervous glance over her shoulder at the door.

Of course it couldn't be that easy.

"Fine," Ciri grumbled. She turned to Olgierd. "Back to the inn, I suppose? I can come back tomorrow."

"Oughtn't keep Vlodimir waiting," he said. "He gets bored faster than I do."

The woman made a thin squeak, as if the thought of what a bored Olgierd might do was too much for her to deal with. He didn't dignify it with a response.

"I'll show you the way to the stables," he said as he got up from the couch. "Looks like you'll be spending another night with us."

Despite her annoyance at the setback, Ciri couldn't help being just a bit excited at the prospect.

“You’ll want to get involved. Don’t.”

“I won’t,” she muttered to herself as she followed Olgierd out the door.

But no one said she couldn’t *like* them.

A High Stakes Wager

Chapter Notes

beta-read by brightspot149—thank you!

Chapter-specific warnings: references to Ciri's past with the Rats (allusions to rape), and continued references to the assault of the maid.

“Blast!”

Vlodimir’s towering house of gwent cards toppled over in a rush as Ciri and Olgierd came through the door of the Black Mare.

“Bored, were you?” Olgierd asked, eyeing the mess.

“The innkeep’s lass wouldn’t play me,” he said with a shrug as he started to collect the scattered cards. “She just gave me this look”—he turned wide eyes in a still face at them—“and whispered something about laundry. Mousy thing.”

“Did you ask her, or did you proposition her?” Ciri asked.

“Proposition a mouse?” he echoed indignantly. “I gave her a lovely compliment or two to lift her spirits, invited her to sit by my side and pass the time with a quaint diversion. Proposition? Do you think me a cad, or do you think I’ve no standards?”

She crossed her arms and stared at him.

“She was almost assaulted last night,” she pointed out. “By one of your men. All of you likely intimidate her.”

The annoyance fell from Vlodimir’s face as he stiffened. “I would never! Pleasure is sweetest when it’s willing. Any half-wit could tell you that.”

Tension unclenched between her shoulders. He had killed Borys for laying hands on the maid, after all, and despite all his flirtation and innuendos, he hadn’t once touched Ciri against her will. Even should he grow bolder, she suspected he’d stop if she said no.

He gathered up the last of the cards and sat facing them at the table’s bench.

“Any luck getting that manuscript of yours?” he asked.

“The librarian told me to come back later,” Ciri said. “There were ‘irregularities’ to my request.”

Something about that ‘irregularities’ business itched at her in hindsight. She’d have to pry into it tomorrow.

“Then we have the pleasure of your company another night!” He caught himself and added with less enthusiasm, “Ah, damned shame, turtle-dove. Those dullards at the university are a useless breed.”

“I’ll try to find the time to return with you tomorrow,” Olgierd said. “I can’t promise you anything, mind.”

“That’s fine,” Ciri told him. “You’ve both been more than generous.”

“Entirely our pleasure, tulip,” Vlodimir said with a wink.

Olgierd nodded in distracted agreement. “As he said. It’s no hardship. Now, I’ve matters to see to in Oxenfurt—”

“No, you haven’t,” Vlodimir interrupted.

Olgierd looked at him. “You know I do. Said it yourself at the Alchemy yesterday.”

“And I went and visited them myself.”

“Oh, for”—Olgierd scrubbed a hand across his mouth as his brother leaned back against the table smugly—“And?”

Vlodimir cast a swift glance at Ciri and got to his feet. He tossed an arm around Olgierd’s shoulders, and with a brief apology, drew him toward the other side of the room. Ciri took a seat at the vacated bench and tried not to listen too closely.

Unfortunately for the brothers’ privacy, there were very few soft surfaces in the common area to muffle the sounds of their voices, however low they kept them.

“That rancid churl down at the docks wouldn’t so much as listen.”

“I should have gone—whoreson would have heard me out, one way or another.”

“That was the rub. Loan sharks don’t do business with other sharks, so to speak. Our kneecaps aren’t as tender when the bill comes due.”

“Isn’t that a splendid pile of shite. And the one by the gallery?”

Vlodimir’s voice shook with anger. “Couldn’t bring myself to set foot past their bloody door. They had the painting from the front hall hanging on their wall. The hunting scene Father loved so dearly. I saw it clear as day through their window.”

Olgierd cursed softly. “Can’t blame you for that. Bloody vultures.” He paused. “Might sell —”

“What, the horses? Your sword?” Vlodimir gripped his brother’s shoulder. “Stop. We’ll figure something out without sacrificing what’s left.”

Olgierd sighed and leaned into Vlodimir’s hand for a moment before pulling away. The brothers turned and walked back to the table, and Ciri looked up at them guiltily. She indicated the ceiling with a raised finger.

“The sound carries.”

They both stared down at her with unreadable expressions for a long second. Then a faint huff of laughter escaped Olgierd.

“Commendable honesty. And the mistake was ours.”

Vlodimir relaxed as well, aiming his charming smile at Ciri. “Well, sugarplum? How shall we entertain such a delightful woman as yourself without the band about? A round of gwent? We could play for clothes.”

“If you start playing for clothes, I’m leaving for Oxenfurt regardless,” Olgierd said.

Vlodimir laughed and slung his arm around his brother’s shoulders again. “Fine, fine! We’ll find another diversion. By the gods, you’ve turned into a bore.”

Olgierd shook his head and didn’t argue. “Either ply me with something strong or get me back on my horse. We saw the Ofieri at the university, walking the campus bold as brass.”

“And you didn’t gut the whoreson?”

“Didn’t get the chance.”

He didn’t look Ciri’s way or indicate that she’d stopped him. She didn’t regret it, though the low, bitter anger in his voice was painful to hear.

“How about a ride out to the pond by Carsten?” Vlodimir suggested. He shook his brother by the shoulders lightly. “Eh? We could race! That would take your mind off that flaccid prick.”

“In the absence of better options,” Olgierd agreed. He turned to Ciri. “Up for a race?”

Vlodimir brightened and interrupted. “Oh ho! You wouldn’t ask if she hadn’t kept her seat well on Umbra. A good rider, are you, lily?”

“Very good,” Ciri said. She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re not going to say something stupid about how the only thing a woman can mount properly is a cock, are you?”

He guffawed. “I think the women in our band might have my stones for a line like that. You took the churl who said that to task, I hope.”

“I challenged him to a race, with the wager being my sword against a mare from the stables,” she told him. “It turned out the mare belonged to his employer, so I raced him instead. And I won.”

“Aha!” Vlodimir grinned from ear to ear and gave Olgierd another shake. “That’s what this race needs. A wager.”

“Might’ve escaped your notice, but we’ve nothing to wager,” Olgierd said, waving a hand at his plain white shirt and the robe Vlodimir was wearing for the second day in a row.

Vlodimir dropped his arm from around Olgierd’s shoulders and rubbed his hands together, looking at Ciri in anticipation. “Here’s my proposal, my sweet. If you win, you may land a kiss anywhere on this old mug that you please. Anywhere on my person, even. No need to be shy.”

Ciri laughed. “So generous!”

“And if *I* win”—he looked her up and down yet again—“then I may do the same. One kiss. Anywhere I choose.”

“Above the shoulders,” she said swiftly.

“Oh... very well.” He held up a hand as if to stifle her protests. “But you needn’t fear that I’ll keep your passions so constrained.”

“Ha!” Olgierd let out a bark of laughter.

Vlodimir rounded on him. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten you, dear brother. *You* need to liven up a bit. Care to join the wager with our lovely new friend?”

“I’ve made a commitment to Iris,” Olgierd said, annoyance clear in his voice.

“And I’m sure Fiona will be very respectful of your maidenly virtue,” Vlodimir dismissed. “Have you got a pike up your arse about having fun?”

Olgierd sighed and cut a reluctantly amused glance at Ciri. “Be gentle with me,” he said dryly.

A burst of laughter escaped Ciri, and Vlodimir tossed his arm around Olgierd’s shoulders again.

“That’s the spirit!” he crowed. “To the stables. Carsten awaits!”

Ciri stifled another laugh at one of Vlodimir’s seemingly endless innuendos as she rode between the brothers down the hard dirt road. The afternoon sun warmed her face and put a lazy softness in her muscles, one she saw mirrored in Olgierd’s posture when she looked to her right.

The ride out had been a good idea on Vlodimir’s part. Only a shadow of Olgierd’s earlier bitter anger could be seen lingering in his eyes. On her left, Vlodimir cracked another joke, and the anger chipped away a tiny bit more.

Vlodimir reined in Falka and held up a hand to stop Ciri as Olgierd drew to a halt on her other side.

“That’s Carsten, I take it?” Ciri asked, gesturing to the little village just to their right. It looked like a modest place, with a sturdy windmill as its largest and most impressive building.

Vlodimir nodded. “Indeed it is, my keen-eyed snowfinch. Quaint little locale, isn’t it?”

Sunlight glinted off water half-hidden in golden wheat fields in the distance. Scattered throughout the dense stalks were farmers, and every so often the faint sound of a scythe cutting through stalks could be heard, and the wheat grew thinner.

“We start here,” Olgierd said. He lifted a hand to trace a line in the air ahead of them. “Down the road and twice around the pond, then back to where the road meets it. Agreed?”

Ciri’s hands tightened on Umbra’s reins. “Agreed.”

“I can taste those sweet lips already,” Vlodimir said with a playful leer.

“What happened to ‘anywhere’?” Ciri ribbed him. “Lips ought to be a bit boring for you after all that talk.”

Vlodimir paused and said with a bit of bluster, “Well, I wouldn’t wish to overwhelm you all at once. Especially as you haven’t had the pleasure of experiencing such attentions from me before. Some women find it too much to handle.”

“Mm-hm.” Ciri pressed her lips together to hide her smile.

For a moment it seemed like he’d be affronted. Then he fell into easy laughter. “I ought to avoid your mouth, come to think of it. Your wit has teeth.”

“You still blathering?” Olgierd asked Vlodimir. “Thought we were racing.”

Vlodimir cleared his throat and bent over Falka’s neck, reins gripped in his hands. Ciri and Olgierd followed suit.

“Ready?”

“Ready,” Ciri said.

“Set! *Go!*”

Ciri gave a whoop as Umbra surged forward, breaking free of the horses on either side. The countryside whipped past, bushes flying by. Hooves thundered beneath her as her borrowed mare flew on at a gallop.

A pounding drew close behind her, and she pressed her heels into Umbra’s sides to nudge her on as the wheat fields rushed past in a golden blur. Vlodimir called out to her, closer than she’d like.

“That eager to kiss us, are you, mulberry?”

“Eager to win!”

He laughed as Falka pulled ahead just as they reached the edge of the pond and veered right. Ciri cursed and nudged Umbra’s sides again, but Vlodimir stubbornly kept a length ahead. Around the pond they went, Falka’s drumming hooves the only thing Ciri could focus on.

“Your supple neck?” Vlodimir called back to her. “Those tempting collarbones?”

“You’re awful!”

“A wager is a wager, my peach—bloody hell.”

“*Yes!*”

Ciri snapped Umbra’s reins and pressed her heels into her sides again, flying past the tiring Falka for the final quarter of the second lap of the pond. She reined her in a ways past their finish line and leaped from her back to stroke her neck.

“You’re faster than the wind,” she praised the mare as Vlodimir pounded by on Falka.

“Thank you, girl.”

Vlodimir reined Falka in and swung down from her saddle.

“Blast!” He shook his head and shrugged, grinning at her. “If you need suggestions as to where your lips might wander—”

Ciri rolled her eyes. “You’ll get what I give you.”

“No true cavalier would whinge at such a priceless gift,” he said. He pressed his hand to his heart and smiled winsomely.

Olgierd rode up behind them, and Vlodimir gave him a look of disbelief.

“You threw the race, you clod.”

“Iris,” Olgierd reminded him again as he dismounted. “I thought you’d win.”

“You underestimated our guest,” Vlodimir said. He raised his eyebrows as he looked at Ciri. “You’re a spectacular rider to beat me.”

It seemed to be a rare moment of honest appreciation uncolored by lechery. Ciri nodded her thanks.

“You are. And I did underestimate you.” Olgierd sighed. “Still, a man’s word is his honor. We’ll hitch the horses and see to your winnings.”

He winked at her as he led Barghest off toward the lone tree at the edge of the pond. Ciri felt her cheeks grow warm again, and she silently cursed.

She wasn't staying. He was clearly in love with another woman. He wasn't even a particularly good man to begin with. But her silly, pointless infatuation refused to listen to reason.

She fought down her blush and followed him to the tree, Umbra's reins in hand.

Once the horses were all safely tied to the tree's low, sturdy branches, Olgierd turned to face Ciri, feet planted beneath him as if he'd grown roots and hand resting on the hilt of his saber. He eyed her with resigned humor.

"Honestly, you look like you're being marched to the gallows," Ciri said with a scoff.

"Redania's headsmen aren't half as comely as Cintra's," he quipped. He tapped his cheek with a finger and raised his eyebrow at her.

She placed a hand on his sharp jaw and leaned forward to gently kiss his cheek on the other side. The end of his moustache brushed the corner of her mouth as she pressed her lips to his skin, warm and smooth and only just starting to prickle again as his stubble grew back from the morning shave. She drew back and let her hand fall.

"Iris is a very lucky woman to have such a devoted suitor," she said, giving him a small smile.

The tense set of his shoulders loosened, and his eyes softened. "I'm the lucky one."

Ciri took another step back as the soft look in his eyes took on a distinct shadow of pain, and regret stabbed at her. Not for the kiss. She wasn't selfless enough to regret that. But for her agreement not to get involved in the von Everec brothers' business. She could only hope that Olgierd and Iris would find a way to get back together.

"Come now, brambling, you haven't forgotten your dear old Vlodimir, have you?" Vlodimir called out from where he leaned against the tree trunk. He extended a beckoning hand to Ciri.

She rolled her eyes again as she walked over to join him. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a ridiculous man?"

"Ridiculous? Never. 'Cocky', mind you," he said, giving her a cheeky grin as he widened his stance.

"Oh, for pity's sake," Ciri groaned.

She darted in to peck his cheek and pulled back before he could finish turning his head to capture her lips with his. He frowned at her as she gave him a triumphant smile. Several feet away, Olgierd let out another sharp bark of laughter.

"Ha! Teach you to try and cheat a woman out of her prize."

Vlodimir's grin took on a self-effacing edge. "A hound knows when he's outfoxed."

"And you are most certainly a hound," Ciri agreed.

Olgierd interrupted whatever fresh innuendo Vlodimir had at the ready. “Now that that business is taken care of,” he said, “I brought some nibbles for the road. Anyone else a bit hungry?”

“We didn’t have lunch,” Ciri said. “I could eat.”

Vlodimir dropped to the dirt at the base of the tree and patted the ground beside him. “Come and share the shade with me, blueberry. I promise to keep my lips to myself—unless you change your mind.”

“I won’t,” she assured him, bending down to sit next to him with her legs stretched out before her.

She looked up as Olgierd held out something wrapped in waxed cloth, and she took it from him to find a bread roll stuffed with sharp-smelling cheese and thinly sliced cured ham.

“It’s not much, but it’ll tide you over,” he said. He handed Vlodimir a second roll and settled on her other side with his own.

A companionable silence fell between them as they ate their belated lunch in the dappled shade of the tree’s branches, the pond glimmering a sunlit blue-green at their feet. A soft breeze rustled the wheat fields and the leaves above them, and songbirds twittered as they flew past. The horses nickered to each other quietly on the other side of the tree.

Ciri relaxed against the rough bark, her shoulders brushing the brothers’ strong arms on either side of her. She hadn’t thought to find the past so pleasant, or Redania so inviting. But this was practically serene.

Vlodimir polished off his roll and crumpled the cloth in his hand. He nudged Ciri companionably with his elbow.

“Our band can outride any city guard or soldier. But you just put them all to shame. If they had half your skill on horseback, we could conquer Temeria.”

She eyed him as she chewed her last bite slowly, the salt of the ham mingling with the sharpness of the cheese on her tongue. At last, she swallowed.

“What could you possibly want with Temeria?” she asked.

He grinned. “In its ownership? Not a bloody thing; the place is a backwater. But it’s ripe for the taking along the border. Their hooch is stronger than ours, and their women”—he sketched a sinuous shape through the air—“rosy cheeks and fleshy curves, all of them. Though none hold a candle to your charms.”

Ciri scoffed and elbowed him back. “Do you ever stop thinking about women?”

“Nay,” Olgierd said from her other side. “He doesn’t.”

“He says this now,” Vlodimir said to Ciri, tossing his balled-up cloth over her head to hit Olgierd. “But before he met his lady-love he was just as much of a rogue.”

“Bald-faced lies,” Olgierd said, tossing the cloth back. It bounced off Vlodimir’s head and landed in Ciri’s lap. “I was never as bad as you.”

“And I maintain that you’re both awful,” Ciri said. She snatched the last discarded cloth from Olgierd’s lap and balled it up with the other two, ready to throw at a moment’s notice.

Vlodimir burst into laughter as Olgierd chuckled. “Mercy, rosebud. Stow your missiles away and relax.”

“Hmph.” She set them to the side, still carefully within reach.

“Something I’ve been wondering,” Olgierd said. He gestured to Ciri’s face. “That scar of yours... Is there a story to it? Has to be, I expect.”

“And if there isn’t, you’ve no doubt thought up a good one,” Vlodimir added.

Ciri hesitated. She didn’t know for certain, but she didn’t think orions would come into use on the Continent for another fifteen years at least. And Nilfgaard was even more of a backwater than Temeria currently, so the idea of a Nilfgaardian spy would be laughable.

She decided to tell a much-amended tale from her past, one with just enough truth to it to lend it authenticity.

“When I was almost fifteen, a mercenary passing through Geso killed all my friends,” she said. “I rode into town to see him strike down the last of them. I flew at him in a rage, used all the training I had, but he beat me. Humiliated me.”

She tapped her scarred cheek as Olgierd had tapped his earlier. “He did this, as a souvenir. A hermit outside of town sewed it up for me.”

Olgierd nodded at her scar. “It’s healed well. That hermit did a fine job.”

Vysogota had saved her life. The one who’d improved the scar’s livid appearance had been Avallac’h. She still couldn’t work out how she felt about him personally, though at the very least she was grateful for his assistance with that—and with the White Frost.

“And where’s the whoreson now?” Vlodimir asked. “It’s not too much to hope that he’s dead in a ditch somewhere, is it?”

“Not a ditch, but very dead,” Ciri said. “I more than repaid him the favor.”

“Well done,” Olgierd said. He tilted his head at her in curiosity. “You say you’ve had training? Formal training in swordplay?”

Oh. She hadn’t meant to say that—she was meant to be a common as dirt mercenary.

“I have,” she said simply.

“This I simply must see,” Vlodimir declared. “Outracing me is one thing, lovely, but no one swings a saber like a von Everec.”

“But I don’t swing a saber,” Ciri shot back. “I swing a gwyhyr.”

Vlodimir slapped his thigh and looked past Ciri to Olgierd. “As clear a challenge as I’ve ever heard.”

“So it is.” Olgierd stood up and extended a hand to Ciri, the other resting on the hilt of his saber again. “Care to cross blades? I’d like to see this training of yours.”

She let him help her up and dropped her eyes to his sword. “It seems risky to duel without armor,” she said.

“Risky? Bah,” Vlodimir said with a snort. “We never wear armor. You seem to be of the same mind, unless I miss my mark.”

“Let’s call it a friendly bout,” Olgierd said. “A show of skill. We aren’t aiming to draw blood, merely to demonstrate mastery. I’ll pull my blows if I must. Does that suffice as reassurance?”

‘Dangerous men’, the innkeeper at the Alchemy had called them. Yet he’d also called Olgierd a man of his word.

“It does,” Ciri said. She looked around and pointed to a barren patch of earth near the pond a short distance from the tree. “Over there? We wouldn’t want to spook the horses.”

“A fair point. Come.”

He turned and strode to their makeshift dueling arena, and Ciri followed in his wake. Behind her, she heard Vlodimir get to his feet to join them.

“Traditionally, a duel ends when honor is satisfied,” Olgierd said as he unsheathed his blade. “But you’ve not offended my honor, and there’s no duel at hand. So, let’s say we’ll end it when either of us has had enough.”

Ciri pulled *Zireael* from its scabbard and smiled at him. “That’s very reasonable.”

He held his saber one-handed, the tip level at her chest. “I’m nothing if not a reasonable man.”

Ciri widened her eyes as she raised her sword. “I wouldn’t dream of calling you anything else.”

“Ha!” He swept out his saber to strike her blade with a controlled turn of his wrist. “The cheek on you.”

She parried the blow and struck back quickly only for him to block it with ease, deflecting her sword down and away. She spun out of reach in a pirouette and darted back in to strike again, and he caught her blade once more and turned it aside.

“Light on your feet,” he observed, his eyes alight with interest. “Come at me.”

They fell into a quick rhythm, strike-parry-break-strike. Everywhere Ciri was, so was Olgierd, an impenetrable, mobile wall. She added spins, flourishes, half-turns—he met them all with a faint smile and a word of approval. From the sidelines, Vlodimir called out advice and encouragement.

Frustration bit at her, and she struck harder. He nodded and parried with a smile.

“Good!”

She breathed and let her annoyance go. She was an excellent swordswoman; Geralt and the other witchers had trained her well, better than well. But Olgierd fought like he’d been born with a blade in his hand. He might give even Geralt pause.

She smiled back and darted in with a flourishing strike. Fighting someone better than her, for fun? It wasn’t frustrating. It was sheer joy.

At last, he stepped back and lowered his saber. “You’re pure grace with a blade,” he complimented her. “I’ve no knowledge of any school or training master who teaches the art quite that way. Where did you learn?”

Casting a mental apology to Geralt, she said honestly, “I was a witcher’s Child of Surprise. He took me to the witchers’ keep when I was twelve, and he and the other witchers decided to train me.”

“The first thing your father saw when he came home?” Vlodimir guessed. “Hard luck. Though I hadn’t thought witchers trained girl children.”

“The Cat school does,” Olgierd said. “But you haven’t the eyes, so I’m guessing something changed.”

Ciri shrugged and sheathed *Zireael*. “My training only lasted about a year before I left the keep. I still see him now and then, the witcher who took me in. He’s a good man. Trustworthy.”

“Rare in a Cat, or so I hear.” He sheathed his sword as well and looked at her thoughtfully. “Though Cats are nomadic. And the Bear School disbanded. So, your witchers would have to be from the Wolf or Viper schools. Or even Griffins.”

“The School of the Viper,” she said casually. “In Nilfgaard.”

“From Cintra to Nilfgaard to Geso to our fair Redania,” he said with a shake of his head. “You’ve lived an eventful life.”

“And all the places in between,” she said in a vast understatement. She smiled. “My favorite was Skellige.”

Olgierd inclined his head at the horses. “You’ll have to share some of your stories on the ride back to the inn.”

“Starting with what you were doing in Skellige, of all places,” Vlodimir added.

“Learning to ice skate,” Ciri said laughingly as she walked ahead of them.

She reached the horses before they did and untied the rope hitching Umbra to the branch. With an absent pat to the mare’s cheek, she turned back to the brothers to see them slowly walking her way, their heads bent toward each other as they looked at Ciri.

Her earlier joy dimmed a little, and her suspicion returned, battling against just how much she liked them despite herself.

Well. If she hadn’t made an impression earlier, she most assuredly had now.

A stray thought crossed her mind as she led Umbra out from under the tree and mounted her back, and even as she had it, she bit her lip and winced.

If fourteen-year-old Ciri had encountered Vlodimir or Olgierd instead of Kayleigh in that inn —

If the bandits who’d taken her in had been led by these men—

Perhaps her first night as a bandit wouldn’t have been so chokingly, humiliatingly miserable. Neither of them had so much as touched her without her permission, and they’d killed a man for trying to have his way with a woman. That put them one up on the Rats.

But she imagined even Bonhart might have trouble with Olgierd. And then she’d have been stuck killing and raiding for life.

It was a stupid, impossible thought, one that wasn’t worth dwelling on.

“What’s amiss, moonbeam?” Vlodimir asked as he led Falka over, Olgierd and Barghest right behind him. “You’ve far too lovely a face to wear a frown like that.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Ciri dismissed. She sighed and smiled at him and Olgierd. “The two of you are trouble, I hope you know.”

Another sharp bark of laughter escaped Olgierd as Vlodimir clutched Falka’s saddle and laughed uproariously.

“Oh, Fiona,” Vlodimir said once he got his laughter under control. His voice brimmed with amusement. “Stay awhile. You’ll see just how much trouble we can be.”

now with fanart! Ciri, Vlodimir, and Olgierd under the tree together after the race, by @goblinpoof on Instagram.



Scents of the Past

Chapter Notes

beta-read by brightspot149—thank you!

Warnings for this chapter: Ciri has a psychological/physiological reaction to the smell and sight of fisstech being used due to her past forced abuse of it. Vlodimir uses fisstech and generally makes a bit of an ass of himself. Later, Ciri talks with the maid about the attempted sexual assault. This chapter was given a sensitivity read by someone who works in the mental health field, specifically with clients in recovery from addiction, but still, take care if this is a trigger.

Another cheerful shout greeted Olgierd and Vlodimir as they entered the Black Mare with Ciri, and she looked about to see that most of the band had returned from their day of carousing in Oxenfurt. They'd once again taken over the common area, sprawling across the benches, tables, and floor in a haphazard display of carefree revelry. The heavy scent of spilled ale and liquor mixed with the roast chicken on the nearest table, making the whole room smell like a back-alley tavern.

And the hard, sharp smell of fisstech cut through it all like a knife.

"Have a drink with us!" one of them called out, brandishing a bottle at the brothers.

Another man thumped a small box on the table before him, and Ciri tried not to stiffen. "Or somethin' stronger if you like. Ey?"

Vlodimir looked at Ciri and tilted his head at the band in invitation. She forced a smile and shook her head.

"I think I'll pass on that, thank you."

"At least join us, moonstone," he coaxed her.

She shook her head again as the man flipped open the lid of the box and dipped his finger in.

"You go enjoy yourself," she said. "I'll be—"

"at that table," Olgierd interrupted, pointing to the unoccupied far corner of the room. "With me."

"Not in the mood for their antics?" Vlodimir asked.

“Not tonight. And Vlod,” Olgierd said, “don’t lose your head. They ought to mind themselves after last night, but if they don’t...”

“I’ll keep them in line.”

Vlodimir clapped his brother on the shoulder. He strode across the room to sit on the other side of the table from the man with the box of fisttech and stretched out his hand to accept an overflowing tankard of ale from another bandit.

Ciri followed Olgierd to the empty table in the corner, pausing as he grabbed a bottle and two small glasses from another table as they passed. He poured her a small measure of something golden and almost sweet-smelling and slid it her way as they settled onto the bench facing the room.

“You look as though you’ll be ill,” he said. “That ought to settle your stomach.”

She clenched her hand beneath the table and braced it on her knee for a moment to keep it still before reaching for the little glass.

“My stomach is fine,” she told him.

The liquor’s fumes teased her nose, a potent blend of herbs and honey. She sipped at it slowly, letting the sweet, spicy flavor wash over her tongue.

“It’ll steel your nerves, then.” He took a larger sip from his glass and caught her eyes. “What’s troubling you? Is it my men? They’ll not touch the maid again. We’ve settled the matter.”

“No, it’s... it’s nothing,” Ciri said, looking away.

As her eyes left his, she caught sight of Vlodimir on the other side of the room, rubbing his finger across his gums beneath his upper lip. Her stomach clenched, and her hand shook just a little around the glass.

“Fiona.”

She looked back at him to find him toying with his glass and watching her.

“I take your needs as my guest seriously,” he told her. “I can’t provide for you adequately if I don’t know what eats you.”

Ciri took another sip and tried to think of a good way, any way, to get out of the conversation. She came up utterly, uselessly empty of excuses.

“Your band,” she said carefully. “Do they... always celebrate so raucously?”

Olgierd looked out at the room of bandits as they grew steadily more intoxicated and snorted. “This? They’re tame as kittens tonight. Most times, we might have ourselves a fistfight or two, tap open barrels of mead and ale, invite in some women to liven things up. A time or two past, the building hasn’t been left standing after.”

“I see.”

“And what’s this have to do with that look on your face?”

She pressed her free hand flat against her thigh, feeling the tremors running through it. On the table, she clutched her glass to still her other hand.

“They have fisstech often, then?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders and poured himself more of the honey-colored liquor. “Why not? So long as they’re sober come morning, it’s no business of mine what they do. As a recreational habit, it’s harmless enough. Vlod and I both indulge on occasion. Only the dimwitted or the reckless let it go too far.”

“Ah,” she said quietly. “Right.”

He looked at her sharply, his eyes roving from her face to her hair and back.

“You—”

“neither a dimwit nor reckless,” she said, her voice still quiet.

“Your hair,” he said. There was a hint of judgment in his gaze. “It would take a great deal of it to do that to a body.”

“I was barely more than a child,” she said. “And it wasn’t by choice.”

With the Rats, she’d ‘indulged’ as Olgierd and Vlodimir had—perhaps more than had been wise. But Bonhart had forced it on her. And she lived with the consequences over a decade on.

Olgierd leaned back against the wall, his expression tinged with regret. “Been a while since I’ve shoved my foot that far in my mouth. Forgive me. I spoke without thinking.”

She nodded her acceptance of his apology and took another sip.

“The one who pushed it on you,” he started.

“Dead,” Ciri interrupted.

“You’ve a habit of finishing off your enemies,” he said approvingly. He took a drink and caught her gaze again. “Is it them, then? Seeing it?”

“It’s the smell,” she admitted.

“Hm.” He drummed his fingers on the table and stood. “I won’t be but a moment.”

Ciri watched him stride away toward the kitchen, leaving her alone at the table in a room full of half-soused bandits. She tossed back the rest of her glass in a sizeable gulp that burned going down and eyed the bottle.

A burst of rowdy laughter across the room made her look over. A dice game had started up at one table, jewelry and coins slowly accumulating between the players. At a second table, Vlodimir arm-wrestled one of the bandits, smashing his fist down without a hint of strain and shouting a challenge to the next comer.

The hard, sharp smell cut through the inn again as the box's lid opened once more for the fisstech to do another round. Ciri peeled her hand from the glass and laid it flat against her thigh alongside the other one, pressing down until the trembling stopped.

She clenched her fingers in her trousers. If Olgierd didn't come back in the next thirty seconds, she was leaving, no matter what he had in mind. Sitting here alone, without even the distraction of his conversation, was unbearable.

She sat up abruptly as her mother's perfume wafted into the air.

No—no. Just lilacs, not lilacs and gooseberries. The strong, heady scent of lilacs, sweet and almost overpowering, more potent than anything else in the inn's common area. But where—

“Saw the innkeep's lass bring these in this morning when I came down for breakfast,” Olgierd said, setting a vase filled with the small purple flowers in their dense clusters on the table. “I asked if we might have them for the night.”

Ciri stared at him, at a loss for words.

He paused halfway back into his seat. “You'll pardon the observation, but that's not the look of someone satisfied with the solution to their problem.”

“No!” she blurted. “No. It's—”

She blinked hard and took a deep breath, and the warm, familiar smell of lilacs surrounded her.

“It's exactly right. Thank you.”

He finished sliding into his seat and gave her a firm nod. “It would be against the chivalric code to be a poor host to my guest. Borrowed posies are the least I can do.”

Her heart gave an inconvenient throb as her infatuation curled around it and squeezed gently. Mercifully, she didn't blush.

“You mentioned a chivalric code before,” she said. “What is it?”

“Guidelines for how a nobleman ought to conduct himself,” he told her, picking up his glass again. “Vlodimir and I were both raised to the standard, though admittedly we're a bit shite at following some of it. We have some we hold firm on. Hospitality is sacred. Never cower before an enemy. A man's word is his vow. Respect the honor of women.”

“It's a good code to have,” she said.

She hoped they'd keep to it, though who knew what a few more years of banditry would do to such a code. They weren't *good* men, not really. But to remember lilacs from this morning and bring them to her tonight—perhaps they were good in their own small way.

Ciri pressed her hands to her thighs again and found them steady and still. She reached into the purse at the small of her back and fished out a modest deck of cards, tapping the edge on the table to get Olgierd's attention.

"Up for a few rounds of gwent?"

"I rarely turn down a game," he said, reaching for his belt. "For stakes less exciting than my brother proposed earlier, if you don't mind."

"Let's say... a shilling and a question," Ciri said. "About anything."

"Almost too rich for my blood," he replied. "Ahh, why not. Let's live dangerously."

She laughed as he set down his deck on the table beside hers. "The Northern Realms? I'm not surprised at all."

"Vlod prefers the monsters," he said. "I've a fiendishly hard time beating him. And you—Scoia'tael? Respectable choice."

Ciri scooted another foot away from him and half-turned in her seat to face him, setting her elbow on the table. They both drew their cards, and she hid a frown and discarded two to draw replacements. Olgierd discarded and drew one.

He dug a coin out of the purse at his belt and balanced it on the back of his thumb. "Your call."

"Eagle."

The coin spun up in the air to land in his palm, and he slapped it on the back of his other hand. "You have it."

She grinned and set down a muster card. He shook his head as she rifled through her deck for its mates.

"Precisely why playing my brother is such a pain in the arse."

The game flew by quickly; her mustered forces met their ends at his weather cards, and she returned the favor, drenching his bulked-up siege row with a torrential downpour. His spies summoned new soldiers. Her medics revived the fallen.

Finally, in the aftermath of battle, he leaned back and tapped the table. "I'll take that shilling if you don't mind. Well played."

"Is there anything you're bad at?" she asked, handing it over.

“Before I met Iris, I was terrible at keeping my trousers up around women,” he said, straight-faced. She gave him a flat stare, and a twitch at the corner of his mouth gave him away.

“Again, *awful*,” she said, and he chuckled.

“To be fair,” he added, “their skirts slipped just as often.”

She groaned and turned away.

“Contract law,” he said after a moment, sounding more serious.

She looked back to see him staring out at the inn, a sudden darkness in his eyes.

“Really?”

“You can’t imagine we enjoy rooming here, our band right underfoot constantly.” His hand clenched around the shilling. “We had lands, a manor. Servants. Business investments and vineyards. I was never the most attentive when it came to estate management. I preferred art and horses. So, when vine rot took the vineyards and we owed the crop to a winery, when the businesses we’d invested in went under and took our money with them—”

His knuckles went white as a muscle jumped in his jaw. Then, with what looked like effort, he relaxed and looked back at her. “I thought I was the one who was meant to be asking the question.”

Ciri’s heart sped up. Reckless of her, very reckless, wagering such an open question with someone so keenly observant. He’d already pried more from her than she’d thought to admit, even as half-truths.

“Ask away,” she said. She busied herself collecting her cards back in a neat stack and waited for the question to fall.

Her skin prickled as she felt his eyes studying her, and her hands tightened minutely around her deck of cards. A faint huff of laughter escaped him.

“The incidents with my band aside,” he said, “how have you been enjoying our company?”

She looked at him sharply.

“I—you’ve been excellent hosts. I’ve enjoyed myself greatly, thank you.”

His small smile held satisfaction at its edges. “And how do you find Redania?”

“That’s two questions,” Ciri countered, but at his expectant look, said, “It’s beautiful. Welcoming. Oxenfurt is a wonderful city.”

He nodded, as if he’d expected her answer. “Perhaps—”

“Well, isn’t this a cozy sight!” Vlodimir interrupted, his voice cutting loud and fast across his brother’s. He stood on the other side of the table and stared down at them, hands planted on

his hips and eyes shining subtly with the high of fisstech.

“You were meant to be keeping an eye on them,” Olgierd said. He inclined his head at the band beyond Vlodimir.

“Bah, they’re playing like pups,” Vlodimir dismissed. “But this? Blossoms on the table, brother?”

“Vlod.” Olgierd’s voice was quiet. “Haven’t you somewhere else to be?”

Vlodimir shrugged at him and tutted as he looked between them, taking in the bottle, the glasses, and the cards. “Gwent? Time was you’d have had her on your knee by now. Another drink should loosen you up nicely. By her blushes, she’d enjoy the seat.”

Ciri glared at him, feeling her cheeks heat again.

Olgierd sighed and stood from the table. He drew Vlodimir away and lowered his voice, and this time the raucous crew of bandits drowned out most of what he said, though the hard, intent tone was clear. He slapped his brother on the back as he finished speaking, and he gave him a light shove toward the reveling band.

“Fine, fine. I’ll leave you to it,” Vlodimir said. “Though you’ll find my lap much more hospitable, dewdrop, if you’ve a mind to join me.”

“You’re reusing your endearments,” Ciri shot after him as he strolled away.

Olgierd sat again, reaching for the bottle. “I apologize for that.”

“There’s no need to apologize for your brother,” Ciri said.

“He discomfited you. I’ve no doubt he’ll regret it come morning.” Left unsaid, and heavily implied, was that he’d better.

He poured himself another glass and tilted the bottle toward her in a silent question. She shook her head.

“No, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.”

Ciri tucked her cards back in the pouch at the small of her back. “I think I’ll go see if the maid is available to bring some hot water up to my room. I’m sorry for ducking away early.”

“Don’t let Vlod’s words chase you off,” he said. “You must know it’s not a line I’d cross.”

“I know,” she said, and the complicated throb of wistfulness and desire mercifully kept itself from her face and voice as she answered. “But truly, I’ve spent too long on horseback today. I need to get clean.”

“Very well. I’ll not stop you.” He nodded at the bouquet. “Take the blooms.”

Ciri took up the vase as she stood. “Olgierd... thank you for the lilacs.”

“It was nothing.”

“It was a lot more than that.”

The heady perfume of the flowers surrounded Ciri on her short walk toward the kitchen. She stuck her head around the door and knocked lightly on the frame, and a mop of blonde curls topping a wary face peeked back at her.

“Something I can do for you?” the maid asked, her brown eyes cautious.

“I was hoping to get some hot water to wash up with,” Ciri said. “I’m in room twelve.”

“Room twelve.” The maid stiffened slightly. “The von Everecs’ guest. I’ll bring your water up straight away.”

“If it’s inconvenient—”

“Not at all, miss. Head up, if you please. I’ll be right behind you.”

The maid withdrew deeper into the kitchen. Ciri hesitated a moment, wondering if she should call her back to tell her it was all right and not to bother, but the sound of a door opening and closing settled the matter.

She made her way to the other end of the far side of the room and journeyed up the narrow stairs to her door at the end of the hall. A cursory look around the room showed that her belongings hadn’t been touched since she’d left, though the bed was neatly made again. She set the vase on the bedside table and sat on the edge of the bed to tug her boots and socks off.

A tentative knock came at the door several minutes later.

“Come in,” Ciri called out.

The maid elbowed her way inside, hauling a heavy bucket of water with both hands. Steam rose in curls from the water’s surface. Ciri jumped up to help, but she just shook her head at her and hefted it across the room to the washbasin herself, carefully lifting it and pouring it in.

“There you are,” she said as she stepped away with her empty bucket. “Was there anything else?”

Ciri hesitated again. “I’ll have some laundry tomorrow.”

“Lay it out on the bed when you leave in the morning and I’ll take care of it,” the maid told her. “Now—”

“Are you all right?” Ciri asked impulsively.

The maid turned stiff as a board. She looked away from Ciri. “I’m fine, miss.”

“Fiona,” Ciri offered. “And... there’s no shame in not being all right. Or in not fighting back.” She swallowed hard. “Believe me.”

“Gods!” The maid’s eyes were full of fire as she jerked her head back to glare at Ciri. “I know full well there’s no shame in it! Not all of us carry swords and fight. Those beasts down there are the shameful ones. Carrying on like they do, taking as they please.”

“Olgierd and Vlodimir did put a stop to it,” Ciri said.

The maid scoffed. “Aye, and now there’s a corpse buried in the yard. If they truly cared to put an end to it, they’d leave and not return, or they’d disband their rogues. Their chivalry only takes them so far.”

To Ciri’s discomfort, she found she couldn’t disagree. She liked them—they were very easy to like. But, as she’d thought before, they weren’t necessarily good.

“Marta,” the maid said abruptly. “If you were going to ask.”

“Marta,” Ciri echoed. “It’s nice to meet you.”

The maid—Marta—nodded stiffly.

“Why are you the only other one here besides the innkeeper?” Ciri asked.

“Cook’s here,” Marta said. “Hostler’s here. My younger sister’s off in Yantra tending to our grandmum, and my older sister’s on her honeymoon with our stable hand. Until they get back, it’s just us. Fine time to leave, if you ask me.”

She squared her shoulders and gripped the bucket tightly. “Enjoy your water, miss. I’ll see to your laundry tomorrow.”

Ciri watched her walk back out the door and once again had the urge to call after her. The words dried up in her mouth, each one less useful than the last, until the door shut firmly behind Marta, leaving Ciri alone with her hot water and her thoughts.

She unbuckled her belts and leaned her sword and dagger against the foot of the bed before stripping out of the rest of her clothes, letting them fall to the floor carelessly. She dug in her rucksack for the neatly wrapped soap and hair wash and walked back across the small room with them to the gently steaming washbasin.

The hot water had only cooled a bit, and she cleaned herself off thoroughly, slightly soapy droplets sliding down her legs to puddle at her feet on the floorboards. She wrung out her clean hair over the basin of dirty water and returned to her rucksack for fresh underclothes and her second to last shirt.

Ciri sat back down on the edge of her bed, damp legs stretched out in front of her, and planted her elbows on her knees to bury her face in her hands.

“That went well,” she muttered.

She'd intended to be consoling, to provide advice. To speak of shared experiences. She hadn't anticipated anger—or to be seen as part of their band and not someone trustworthy.

Her earlier, impossible thought still held true. Fourteen-year-old Ciri would have been better off with these men than with the Rats. But that didn't undo what had happened to Marta, even if Olgierd and Vlodimir had dealt with it so decisively.

“Ugh.”

She flopped backwards onto the bed to stare up at the ceiling. It shouldn't even matter to her, anyway, whether the brothers were complete scoundrels or just likable rogues. She'd get the manuscript tomorrow. If she needed to, she could even find another inn.

She'd made her impression, hadn't she?

She'd get up and finish getting dressed. Any moment now.

The scent of lilacs drifted her way, and she slumped deeper into the mattress. She wasn't going anywhere.

She *liked* them, damn it all. Even Vlodimir's behavior this evening hadn't put too great a dent in her fondness for him.

What had they been like when Geralt had met them? Still so strangely charming, so ridiculously charismatic? No doubt Vlodimir was still a horrible flirt in his late fifties, and she couldn't imagine any world in which Olgierd didn't enjoy art as deeply as he did now.

At that age, they must have put their banditry to bed and returned to the rarified lives of noblemen, with only the odd evening reminiscence about their wilder years to show for it.

“Ugh,” Ciri groaned again, a tiny squirm of guilt gnawing at her stomach.

She resolved to have a word with them about their band. That might soothe her conscience.

A knock on the door made her sit up hastily and reach for the dagger discarded at the foot of the bed. She drew it and approached the door on quiet feet, calling out, “Who's there?”

“Lidia,” came the drawled reply. “Brought you food.”

Ciri cracked open the door and peered around it to see the bandit with the thick brown braid from breakfast standing at the opening, looking bored and faintly tipsy. Lidia shouldered the door aside and came in, her hands full of a plate piled with a glistening roast chicken thigh and a crusty bread roll.

“Olgierd said you went up without eatin’,” she said, thrusting the plate at Ciri. She raised an eyebrow at her half-dressed state. “Said you ought to have somethin' before you turn in.”

Ciri took the plate and went back to the foot of the bed to return her dagger to its sheath.

“That was thoughtful of him,” she said as she sat back on the edge of the bed and began to pick at her supper.

“Aye, that’s Olgierd all over, it is,” Lidia agreed. She leaned against the door and crossed her arms, studying Ciri through narrowed eyes.

“What is it?” Ciri asked after a few bites.

“You ain’t the first,” Lidia said.

Ciri didn’t react. “The first what?”

“‘Guest’,” Lidia said with a snort. “There was Agneta, a few years back. She did sharpshootin’ tricks for a circus passing through town. They took her out to see the sights, bought her baubles, tipped her into bed. She’s been ridin’ with us since.”

Ciri took a large bite off the roll and stared at Lidia silently.

“Stefan, too,” Lidia added, “though that was a boar hunt and a few rounds at the tavern. No ploughin’ involved.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Ciri asked.

“They’re puttin’ in the effort with you and you have your eyes on the horizon,” Lidia said scornfully. “If you ain’t worth their time, find other hosts.”

“I need to get back to my employer,” Ciri told her. “They both know that.”

“Hmph.” A knowing light lit Lidia’s eyes. “Watchin’ the horizon, but stars in your eyes when you look at Olgierd. And you don’t mind Vlodimir chasin’ you.”

Ciri ripped off another bite from the chewy roll.

“Wastin’ your time there,” Lidia advised her. “Olgierd don’t even plough women after raids anymore. He’s a one woman man, that one. And Vlodimir won’t ever settle down, if that’s what you’re after in a man. My advice? Let the big idiot get a leg over. You’ll enjoy the ride, and he’ll let you be after.”

“Speaking from experience?” Ciri asked dryly.

Lidia shrugged and smirked.

“Thank you for bringing me supper,” Ciri said. She hesitated and added, “I’ll keep what you said in mind.”

“About wastin’ your time?”

“About not letting them waste theirs.”

Lidia nodded in satisfaction and let herself back out of Ciri's room. Bereft of appetite, Ciri took a few more nibbles from her plate and set it aside on the bedstand beside the lilacs.

So that was the hidden catch, the undercurrent she'd noticed. It was flattering, in a way, to be valued so highly for her skills and competence, even if the men doing so led a gang of wild marauders. Though on the other hand—it did sting, just a bit, that the charm and attention were bent toward an aim and a goal rather than an uncomplicated overture of friendship.

But Lidia was right. Her eyes were on the horizon, far past the streets and buildings of Oxenfurt and the lush crops of Gustfields, years and countries away, in a cobblestoned courtyard where a witcher and a sorceress waited on a temperate December afternoon in Toussaint. This was neither her time nor her place.

If they were to recruit someone for their band—if they had to have a band at all—it was best they chose someone who didn't intend to leave them twenty-seven years in the past.

A Hound at Play

Chapter Notes

beta-read by brightspot149—thank you!

And thanks to IndiannahJones for the second look at that passage—you're a lifesaver 

Ciri entered the common area and immediately spotted Vlodimir at the nearest table, flinching away from Olgierd's elbow to his ribs. He scooted over to make room for her again and aimed a penitent expression her way.

"I am the very hound you named me, juniper berry," he said as she sat between the brothers. "Forgive an eager courser for getting lost in the chase."

"Juniper berries are bitter," Ciri said, accepting a cup of coffee from Olgierd.

Olgierd chuckled as Vlodimir winced and clutched his heart. Both brothers looked fresh from washing up, and even smelled pleasant. Vlodimir wore a different robe today, one with a subtle green pattern, and Olgierd's white shirt sleeves hugged his muscular forearms nicely. At the other tables, hungover bandits ate and drank, miles more subdued than they'd been the night before.

"My swift starling, you cut me to the quick," Vlodimir said. "Tell me what I can do to make up for last night's offense. I'll see it done."

Ciri studied him carefully over the rim of her cup. Despite his bluster, he did seem truly regretful. Whether that was because it put a crimp in their plans to recruit her, because it violated their 'code', or simply because he liked her was beyond her ability to tell straight out of bed. Perhaps it was some blend of all three.

"Stop looking at me like that," she chided him. She smiled despite herself at his hangdog look.

"Say all is forgiven, and your hound will follow you faithfully," he told her, smiling back.

She snorted into her coffee. "You're still ridiculous, and it's still too early. Fine, I forgive you. Just let me have breakfast before you start your nonsense again."

Olgierd gestured over her shoulder to Marta as she came into the common area. "Some breakfast for our guest."

Marta bobbed a quick curtsy in acknowledgment and went back to the kitchen. Ciri took a sip of her coffee and looked between the brothers quietly. Neither seemed to find anything

amiss with Marta being a jumpy shadow.

She wasn't up for addressing it yet, not before she'd even had breakfast. And it likely wouldn't be wise to do it in front of their band. She set it aside as a matter for later.

"I'd like to take Umbra back to the university after breakfast," she said instead. "You don't need to go with me if you have other things to do."

"As I said before, she's yours to ride for as long as you're with us," Olgierd said. "Though I'll not be joining you. I've a personal matter to see to."

"You'll have the pleasure of my company instead," Vlodimir said with a wink.

"Are you sure?" Ciri asked. "We'll likely end up waiting in the library foyer again. It'll be boring."

"Bah, no such thing with such a delightful companion," he said dismissively.

She took another sip and smiled at him. "I certainly won't turn down the offer."

"We'll make a day of it," he declared. "I'll treat you to lunch; how does that strike you? There's a fishmonger down on the docks who fries up haddock like you wouldn't believe."

"It sounds a sight better than the finest salons of Novigrad," she teased him. "Unless we're going arm in arm to the docks, too."

He looked past her to Olgierd. "Should her tongue be this sharp before she breaks her fast?"

"Drew it on yourself," Olgierd said unsympathetically, sipping from his cup.

A whisper of footsteps came from behind Ciri, and Marta leaned around her to silently place a plate in front of her, covered in the same breakfast of eggs, sausage, and bread roll as before.

"Thank you," she called after her as Marta retreated to the kitchen again.

"What do you intend to do if the head librarian refuses you again?" Olgierd asked. He raised an eyebrow at her. "I can't imagine you'll be content to return to your employer empty handed."

She set her cup down and speared a forkful of eggs and sausage. "I'll figure something out."

Something late at night, involving teleportation and thievery, most likely.

From the small quirk of his lips, he picked up on her general thoughts.

"Do you need to borrow a robe?" Vlodimir asked Olgierd. "Bilewitz is likely to turn you away at the door if you show up looking like that."

"I still have the one left," Olgierd said. "And the jewelry. I'll not present myself as a pauper."

“You could ride up with a carriage filled with the contents of King Vizimir’s treasury, and he’d turn you down,” Vlodimir told him.

Olgierd set his cup down with a sharp *clack*, coffee sloshing a bit over the lip. “What the bloody hell else am I to do?” he demanded, glaring past Ciri at Vlodimir. “By all means, if you’ve a better idea, let’s have it.”

Vlodimir held up his hands and shook his head. “No, no. You go right ahead and press your suit with her father. Again. I’m sure it’ll go splendidly this time.”

“Very helpful,” Olgierd snapped. He stood from the table and took a deep breath, looking down at Ciri. “I’ve no doubt I’ll see you this evening. Best of luck with your manuscript.”

“Thank you,” she said. She aimed a small smile up at him. “Good luck to you as well.”

He nodded to her with the ghost of a smile and turned to stride to the stairs at the back of the room. She watched him go, her still tired eyes lingering on his strong back and long legs as they disappeared from view.

Vlodimir cleared his throat gently, and she whipped her head back around, ready to snap at him for another comment like he’d made the night before.

“More coffee?” he asked instead, lifting the carafe.

His face held only an odd blend of wistfulness and understanding.

“Yes,” she said quietly. She held out her half-full cup. “Please.”

He filled it up to the brim and set the carafe back down. “You’d better eat up, opal. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

Ciri took up a forkful of her breakfast, and she nudged him lightly with her shoulder. “You know... maybe you’re a bit less awful than I said yesterday.”

He laughed and nudged her back. “Still trouble, though?”

“Without a doubt.”

Ciri and Vlodimir dismounted by the little booth at the end of the bridge to Philosopher’s Gate and led their horses to the window. The plump man with the feathered cap looked out at them, somewhat better for wear this morning than the day before.

“Ah, you’re back,” he said to Ciri. “And with, ah—”

“Pull yourself together, man, don’t you recognize a nobleman when you see one?” Vlodimir asked.

“Sir—milord—the last fellow who came through here had a sack full of ‘live specimens’ for the science hall,” the man said. “The one before him was reciting that young bard’s poems

and trying to entice the medical students to ‘examine’ him. You, sir—milord—are”—he looked Vlodimir over—“less *odd* than most of today’s visitors. Forgive the lack of deference. It’s been a long morning.”

The thick guest book thunked down on the booth’s wooden window frame, and the man held out a quill pen and a bottle of ink to take with it.

Ciri bent over the book and flipped through the pages to the first clean one. She dipped the quill in the ink, and once more, wrote *Fiona, 9 April 1250. Library.*

Just beneath it, in handwriting as elegant as his brother’s, Vlodimir signed in as well. He glanced at her in mild surprise as he handed the book back to the booth attendant.

“You’ve a fair hand,” he said. “Better than legible.”

“That’s faint praise,” she said dryly.

“Blast, that’s not how I meant it.” He fell into step with her as they led their horses across the end of the bridge. “You’ve had lessons in calligraphy. It shows in your letters. Did one of your employers offer you patronage for a while?”

Ciri smiled as the endless lessons with Yennefer at the Temple of Melitele immediately came to mind. “There was a sorceress who was very particular about how things had to be drawn and written.”

“*No horses on the*—oh, merciful Melitele,” the groom muttered as he darted over to fling himself in their path. “You again.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll still behave ourselves,” Ciri said, handing over the reins with a polite smile.

Vlodimir glared as he followed suit. “You’ll treat them both as if the good Queen Cerro herself came and delivered them into your care, am I understood?”

“They’ll be well taken care of,” the groom sniffed. “Now mind you don’t draw those weapons on campus. The philosophy students are a jumpy lot.”

Ciri and Vlodimir set off together down the colorful gravel path away from the groom and toward the library. After a moment, Vlodimir laughed under his breath.

“What?” Ciri asked.

“The philosophy students are the ones who started the rebellion almost a decade ago, along with some of the medical students,” he said. “I’ve never seen a bigger bunch of rabble-rousing, pugnacious scrappers in my life. Oh, the fist fights we got into outside the Alchemy were a thing of legend.”

He pointed to a small scar on his chin. “Wiry little tosser managed to mark me for good, if you can believe it. But we kept Stjepan’s patch of Oxenfurt clear of trouble, and in exchange, he gives us a prime discount on his best hooch—so long as we don’t invite the band along.”

“That was altruistic of you,” Ciri said.

“Ha!” His loud bark of laughter made two intently studying students look up from their books as they passed by. “We were there drinking and saw the chance for a brawl. Didn’t even realize Stjepan was in the middle of things until after it was over. He gave us a round on the house and invited us back the next evening to do it again. It’s been our favorite spot to drink since.”

He followed her as she retraced the path Olgierd had led her along, aiming smiles and winks at the female students and professors on the way. For every woman that averted her eyes or hurried on, another blushed or smiled back.

And Ciri could see why. He *was* an attractive man, in a rough and sturdy way, even more so without Olgierd there to outshine him. Terrible at flirting, but that was perhaps part of his charm.

“Here it is,” Ciri said, pulling open the door to the library. “With any luck, we’ll come away with what we’re after this time.”

The woman from the day before stiffened in her seat behind her desk at the sight of Ciri entering with Vlodimir. She hastily finished writing something on the parchment before her and stood, her thin hands fluttering nervously again.

“Oh, you—you came back,” she said, looking back and forth between Ciri and Vlodimir with wide, hesitant eyes. “I was expecting the, ah, the alumnus.”

“Fear not, my dainty butterfly,” Vlodimir said. He swept into a bow and gave her his best smile. “Said alumnus sent me, his dearest brother, in his stead. Vlodimir von Everec, at your eager and willing service.”

“Oh!” The woman’s hands flew to cover her mouth as she blinked at him. Her cheeks went pink. “Oh, ah.”

Ciri stood back quietly and did her best to keep the disbelief from her face. Terrible at flirting? She rapidly reassessed at the blush on the woman’s thin face.

“I understand there was a small wrinkle to my friend’s request yesterday,” Vlodimir continued. “But I’ve no doubt *you*, the shining gem of the library, have the guile and talent to cut through to the heart of the problem and see us to a solution.”

“Oh, *my*.”

He gently captured one of her fluttering hands and brought her knuckles to his lips. “Say we’ll not leave empty handed, my tender hyacinth, and you shall have a devoted servant in me.”

The faintest squeak, like a mouse under a floorboard, escaped from the bright red woman. “I—*well*. I can certainly *try*. Wait right here, sir and miss, and I’ll consult the head librarian again.”

She pulled her hand free and went to the door leading to the library proper, darting a shy glance over her shoulder at Vlodimir as she slipped through and shut it behind her.

Ciri waited a few seconds, laughter building in her chest like a bubble, before she quietly let it out.

“How did that work?” she demanded.

He winked at her. “Lonely, middle-aged spinster, nervous disposition?” He nodded to the woman’s desk. “See that book on the corner, the one that’s been thumbed through? Title on the spine is a romance Agneta was reading last month. Our stalwart guardian of the library is secretly a romantic at heart. Her deepest desire is nothing more than to be swept off her feet by some gallant rogue.”

“That’s... slightly terrible and manipulative, but thank you,” Ciri said. She hadn’t realized he was so observant—though now that she thought of it, when it came to women and flirtation, there was little that he didn’t notice.

“You’re entirely welcome, gumdrop,” he said cheerfully, taking a seat on the velveteen sofa. He stretched his arm along the back and patted it in invitation.

Ciri sat beside him with a few inches of space between them and waited for his arm to drop around her shoulders. To her surprise, it stayed put.

“I had a question for you about your chivalric code,” she said after a moment.

“Ask away!” He turned in his seat to face her. “We insist the band follow it, you know. Half of them may be mindless brawlers, but we’ll make cavaliers out of the other half.”

“Yes, those ‘mindless brawlers’,” Ciri said. She sighed and searched for a good way to say what she needed to ask. “How many Boryses do you have compared to Stefans, Vlodimir? Insisting they follow your code is all well and good, but—”

“We put a stop to it,” he interrupted. “*I* put a stop to it.”

“But it still happened,” Ciri pointed out. “And next time—”

“There won’t bloody be a next time.”

“There will be,” she told him. “Your band’s activities attract a certain type of person, and I think you know it. You can try to beat some semblance of a code into their heads, but the ones who want to join you do it so they can take, and from their view, *anything* is available for the taking.”

He looked at her in offense and indignation, and he slowly withdrew his arm from where it rested along the length of the couch.

“You’ve been with us all of two days and you feel you can judge us?”

“My introduction to your band started with seeing one of its men attempt to assault a maid,” she said. “The girl—her name is Marta, by the way—is still skittish around all of you, and it’s a little wonder.”

“I admit, it wasn’t the best introduction,” Vlodimir allowed. His offense seemed to cool some at the reminder. “But we killed the churl, didn’t we? I can’t help it if the girl’s timid. They’re in line now.”

“She wouldn’t be timid if they’d been in line in the first place,” Ciri said.

He frowned. “Well. That’s so.”

“It’s something to consider.”

He dragged a broad hand down his face and gave her an unusually sincere look. “Fiona. There are peasants across Velen who’d curse us up and down as whoresons, but we’re not that. They all know the code. They’ll not take pleasure where it’s not offered willingly, not without consequences.”

Ciri reached out and lightly squeezed his hand. “I’m sorry to have doubted you.”

He sighed and squeezed back before letting go with a gentle pat. “There’s naught to forgive.”

Whatever he intended to say next was cut off by the door opening again, and his solemn sincerity disappeared instantly behind a mask of flirtatious intent as the woman reappeared.

“My lark,” he said, rising to his feet. “You fly back to us so quickly. Dare we hope you bring good news?”

The woman’s blush was a faint echo of her earlier beet red color, and she darted quick, nervous glances between Ciri, Vlodimir, and the door behind her.

“I’m so sorry, sir, miss. But the irregularities...”

“Surely a clever vixen like you can work something out, hmm?” Vlodimir tried.

She glanced between Ciri and the door again. “I... no, I’m afraid...”

It struck Ciri like a thunderbolt, and she shot to her feet. “It’s not even here, is it?”

The woman’s hands flew to her chest to wring together nervously. “I—I can’t imagine what you mean!”

“Someone has already borrowed it!” Ciri said. Her confidence grew at the woman’s visible dismay. “Forget ‘irregularities’, you’re hiding the identity of who you lent it to. But why the secrecy? I didn’t think libraries told people who checked out books anyway.”

“Oh, periwinkle,” Vlodimir said with a sad shake of his head. “You wouldn’t keep secrets from your dear Vlodimir, would you?”

“The... the borrower was insistent that no one know it had left the shelves,” the woman quavered, her eyes wide as she stared up at Vlodimir.

“Ah, but that’s half the secret sussed out by my friend here, and not at all on your lovely shoulders,” Vlodimir assured her. “Now, just nod or shake your head. Was the borrower a man?”

She shook her head.

“A woman then. A commoner?”

Another shake.

“Hmm. A noble?”

A nod.

“Redanian?”

Another nod.

He grinned. “I doubt it escaped your notice, keen as your mind is, petal, but I myself am a Redanian nobleman. Perhaps my peer would enjoy a friendly visit from me. Now, if Fiona brings you parchment and a quill, you needn’t speak a word. Merely write down your suggestion of a family I might stop in on, and no one will be the wiser.”

Ciri hastily grabbed a fresh sheet of parchment from the woman’s desk and dipped her quill in the inkwell, and she darted over to proffer them to the woman. With a trembling hand, she took them from Ciri and jotted down a Redanian surname.

“Many thanks, my sweet saxifrage,” Vlodimir said, planting another kiss on her knuckles as he took the parchment from her. “We’ll leave you to your duties with our gratitude.”

“Come back again!” the woman called after them as the door swung shut behind them.

On the step to the library, Ciri and Vlodimir looked at each other in silence for a long moment. Then, with a broad grin, he waved the parchment at her.

“Up for a trip to Alness?”

“You awful man!”

She flung her arms around his waist in an impulsive hug. He laughed and returned it with a single strong arm about her shoulders.

“That was so mean,” she scolded him as she pulled away. She smiled back. “Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome.” His grin took on a flirtatious edge. “I knew I’d get those supple arms around my waist eventually.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

He waved the parchment at her a second time. “Truly, though. I meant it when I said we could make a day out of it.”

Ciri looked into his smiling face, and her resolve to get the manuscript taken care of started to waver.

“Actually, let’s have that lunch you promised me,” she said. “Is it the fishmonger near the warehouses? I passed by him as he was frying up the fish a few days ago. It smelled delicious.”

“It tastes even better,” he promised her, tossing an arm around her shoulders as they set off down the path together. “And Fiona…”

“Yes?”

“I’ll talk to Olgierd about what you brought up. But you haven’t a thing to worry about. He’s an honorable chap, a true cavalier. And he’ll always have me around to help.”

A familiar dapple-gray gelding stood patiently at the Alchemy’s railing as Ciri and Vlodimir rode up for supper that evening, fresh from Vlodimir’s whirlwind tour of all his favorite parts of Oxenfurt. Once again, the dirty-cheeked boy from Ciri’s first evening sat vigil over his four-legged charge, looking just as bored as before.

The smile slipped from Vlodimir’s face as he spotted Barghest. He heaved a sigh and dismounted.

“Blast.”

“You don’t think it went well?” Ciri asked. She slipped from Umbra’s saddle and rummaged in her saddlebags for rope to hitch her to the railing.

“If it had, he’d be off with Iris celebrating, not here,” he said. He nodded at Barghest’s saddle. “At the very least, she’d be here with him. No pillion saddle in sight.”

He hitched Falka between Barghest and Umbra and flipped a penny to the boy, whose grubby hand darted out to snatch it from the air.

“What was Olgierd’s mood when he arrived?” he asked. “Poor?”

The boy thought for a moment, then screwed up his face in a scowl, his brow furrowed and his lips pressed tightly together.

“Cheeky,” Vlodimir said, reaching out and cuffing the boy’s ear lightly. He turned to Ciri. “Brace yourself, snapdragon. My brother is a maudlin drunk.”

“Then we’ll just have to do our best to cheer him up, won’t we?” she said.

“That or get him soused enough we have to pour him on his horse,” Vlodimir agreed. He opened the door to the Alchemy Inn and gestured for her to enter. “After you.”

Stjepan narrowed his eyes from behind the counter as they came in. “I told you before,” he started, his voice rising over the low din of the patrons.

“She’s still not one of ours,” Vlodimir assured him. “Only a guest.”

Stjepan harrumphed. “Better a ‘guest’ than a philosophy student. What will it be?”

Ciri followed Vlodimir across the tavern to lean against the counter. “I’ll have a lager,” she said, “and your cabbage rolls again.”

“Make that two orders,” Vlodimir added. “And I’ll take a bottle of vodka back to the table with us.”

“No need,” Stjepan told him. “Your brother already has one. Doubt he’s gone through it already. A crown and a half for the both of you.”

“I have it,” Vlodimir said, waving Ciri off. “It’s a paltry sum, and I’m your host. Don’t slight me by insisting.”

She took her hand off her coinpurse and accepted the tankard from Stjepan. “Fine, but you have to start letting me pay for my room at the inn.”

“What’s that?” he asked. He cupped a hand around his ear. “The patrons are rowdy here this evening. I didn’t catch what you said.”

“Oh, honestly,” she muttered at his grin.

“Your supper will be out in a few minutes,” Stjepan told them, handing Vlodimir a little glass. “Your brother’s at your usual table.”

Sure enough, there he was, tucked away deep in the shadowy corner of the tavern, one hand wrapped around his glass as he slumped over the table. If he hadn’t looked slightly tipsy and entirely morose, he’d have cut an impressive figure, decked out in an embroidered Redanian robe with a jeweled livery collar and rings on his fingers. But as it was, he was a sad sight.

Ciri and Vlodimir slid in across from him, and Vlodimir reached for the bottle to pour himself a shot.

“Went that poorly, did it?” Vlodimir asked.

Olgierd gave him a halfhearted glare. “You know how it went. He turned me down flat, as before. ‘Where will you live? How will you support her?’”

He knocked back his drink and pulled the bottle from Vlodimir’s hands to refill his glass.

“He called me covetous and greedy. Me.”

“The man’s an ass. You know this.” Vlodimir paused. “And where was Iris?”

“Out,” Olgierd said tersely. “Her father wouldn’t tell me where.” His hand tightened on the glass. “If she’s with that whoreson—”

“If she is, you know that stuffed shirt brother of hers will be chaperoning,” Vlodimir interrupted. “He won’t allow for any mischief to ruin a union with a prince.”

Olgierd cursed and drank again. “If she’d been there,” he said, “if she’d added her pleas to mine. Her father dotes on her. He’d have bent at her words; I know it.”

Vlodimir fell conspicuously silent at that.

“Tell me about Iris,” Ciri said to cover it up.

Olgierd’s death grip on his glass loosened, and he smiled just a bit. “My Iris. I mentioned her art before, her creativity. She’s kind as well, a goodhearted woman. And funny—gods, is she ever funny. She made up new verses to the Three Maids of Vicovaro once. I hadn’t laughed that hard in years.”

He looked off into the distance, his eyes soft and fond and slightly hazy with drink. “And she’s a rare beauty. Hair like a raven’s wing, roses in her cheeks, bright green eyes.” He looked over at Ciri and added thoughtfully, “Like yours.”

“Iris is beautiful,” Vlodimir said. He glanced between Ciri and Olgierd and tossed back his drink. “Fiona’s eyes are a bit greener, though. And she’s a beauty as well. The starlight to Iris’ night sky, don’t you agree?”

“I’m right here,” Ciri said in annoyance.

Olgierd hesitated, and he raised his glass to Ciri. “Starlight indeed.”

Ciri’s cheeks went warm. She raised her tankard back. “To your night sky.”

“To my night sky.” He smiled again, small and appreciative, and nodded to her.

Vlodimir drummed his fingers on the table, a restless, impatient beat, and he looked at Olgierd with an edge of frustration in his eyes.

“Her family, mind you,” he said. “Stiffer than a suit of armor, with as much personality between them.”

“She’d join our family,” Olgierd countered. “Be a von Everec, not a Bilewitz. We needn’t even see them more than once a year on Imbolc, or her birthday if she wishes.”

“A noble undertaking, but you’d have better luck convincing a samovila to stop dancing than parting Iris from that family of hers,” Vlodimir said.

Olgierd stiffened and went to retort, only to cut himself off as the serving maid came by with Ciri and Vlodimir’s supper. He waited until the plates were on the table and the girl had

walked away to lean forward, his hazy eyes hard.

“If you’ve something to say, say it.”

“You’ve no interest in hearing it,” Vlodimir said, digging his knife and fork into his roll.

“Don’t play games about this with me, not after the day I’ve had,” Olgierd snapped. “Out with it.”

“Fine.” Vlodimir set down his cutlery and met his brother’s eyes squarely. “I adore Iris. There’s not a thing to dislike about her.”

“And?”

“And she was your perfect match when we still had it all,” Vlodimir said. “Now—well, life looks a bit different, doesn’t it? And sweet Iris doesn’t fit quite as well into our merry band at the inn as she does at the manor, away from our rough and tumble excesses.”

“I *will* fix this,” Olgierd said swiftly. “We’ll have it back, Vlody, I promise.”

“Yes, yes, some miracle will appear as if the gods themselves have deigned to hear our prayers, and our fortune will be restored, and the Bilewitz patriarch will place Iris’ dainty hand in yours in solemn matrimony,” Vlodimir said with a wave of his hand. “I’ll tell you, though. Were I in your shoes, I’d consider the fact that the gods don’t often answer prayers and find myself a new lady-love. One who can swing a sword and outrace your brother and has a winsome face would be a fine start for a man in your position.”

Ciri choked as her lager went down the wrong pipe, and she set her tankard down hastily to pound at her chest.

She quietly got her coughing under control as Olgierd set down his glass and glared at Vlodimir in silence. His brother looked back calmly as he chewed a mouthful of cabbage roll.

Olgierd looked away from his brother to gaze at her, his sea-blue eyes staring into hers with an intensity that made her newly recovered breath catch all over again. In her stomach, butterflies stirred, their wings rustling.

“Fiona is a lovely, capable woman,” he said. “Any man would be lucky to have her.”

He looked down into his glass, and Ciri could breathe again.

“But she isn’t Iris. No one is.”

“You clod,” Vlodimir said under his breath.

“I’ll try again with that moneylender you didn’t visit,” Olgierd said in a brisk change of subject. “We’ll figure something out. Bilewitz can’t keep us apart forever.”

Vlodimir gave a very neutral-sounding grunt, neither agreement nor disagreement, and dug his cutlery into his roll again. “Best of luck, brother. You know I’m with you.”

“No better man to have at my side,” Olgierd said, pouring himself another shot.

Ciri sighed and turned her attention to her supper. At the rate Olgierd was drinking, it would be a trick to even get him back to the Black Mare. They might end up having to tie him to the saddle and lead him after them. Though his tolerance for alcohol was impressive—almost as good as a witcher’s.

She snuck a sidelong glance at Vlodimir as she ate. From throwing himself at her to throwing her at his brother, all in the space of a day.

She set down her fork and stood from the table.

“Going somewhere, rock-rose?” Vlodimir asked.

“I’m getting a glass from Stjepan,” she said with a nod toward the bottle. “I want in on that.”

The motive behind Vlodimir’s new game escaped her. Another look like that from Olgierd might cut her down at the knees.

And she refused to deal with any of this sober.

Slippery When Wet

Chapter Notes

beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

Sunlight cut across Ciri's face like a knife, painting the inside of her eyelids a throbbing scarlet. She groaned and rolled over to hide her face in the dark of the pillow even as her head pounded in protest at the motion.

“Urgh.”

How much did they have to drink last night? Surely, they'd stopped with just the one bottle, hadn't they? She groaned again. No. Vlodimir had left at some point to fetch another; she remembered now.

She rolled back over and cautiously cracked open an eye.

Bright, *very* bright. Well into mid-morning. With a whine of protest, she pushed the heels of her palms into her eyes and stretched out, catlike, the length of the bed, feeling muscles protest and her spine crack and pop.

“*Urgh.*”

Her head pulsed in pain as she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Small mercies—she'd managed to wriggle out of her trousers and take off her corset before falling asleep. But this was most of the outfit she'd been wearing yesterday. She rubbed her temples with her fingertips. The next time she drank with a pair of noblemen-cum-marauders, she'd remember to pace herself better.

She abandoned her dirty clothes at the foot of the bed and rummaged through her pack for a fresh change, pulling them on with ginger movements and wincing as she knelt again to grab her corset and belts. With her boots tugged on and her sword fixed in place on her back, she grabbed her room key from the bedstand and ventured cautiously out the door.

No sound of bandits met her ears as she proceeded down the narrow stairs, and she paused for a moment just to listen.

Nothing—no, a slight noise. One person down in the common area. Marta, most likely. She started down the stairs again.

Olgierd looked up from his book and smiled faintly at her, nodding at the carafe of coffee on the table. To her mild envy and utter lack of surprise, he didn't look any worse for wear after the night's excesses.

Ciri sat across from him, and she planted her elbows on the table to cradle her head in her hands. He laughed softly and poured some coffee into an empty cup for her, pushing it into the space between her arms.

“We feared you’d sleep the day away.”

“The sun woke me up,” she muttered. She pried her hand from her face to reach for the cup. “How are you not half dead?”

“An iron constitution,” he said. “It’ll take more than a night of hard drinking to fell me.”

“Mm.” She sipped from her cup and sighed. “What’s your book about?”

“Redanian poetry,” he said, turning the cover around to show her. “I don’t suppose you’ve an interest.”

“In poetry? I like it quite a bit. My favorite poet is”—she did some quick, pained math and changed her answer—“that new bard, Dandelion.”

Olgierd raised his eyebrows. “You’ve fine taste. He’s very new. Only recently graduated from Oxenfurt Academy and begun performing. I’ll admit to some bias in his favor as a fellow Redanian, but his ballads would be pleasing enough even if he weren’t my countryman.”

He slid the book across the table to her and stood. “Wait here a moment. I’ll see about getting you breakfast.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly as he strode off toward the kitchen.

Ciri took another sip of coffee and lifted her head from her other hand to flip open the book. ‘The Spirit from the Steppe’—she was unfamiliar with this collection. From the look of the cover and the slight wear on the spine, it was a well-loved volume. She squinted at the words of the first poem and rubbed her temple again.

Perhaps dense, depressing poetry wasn’t the best idea while she was still hungover, no matter how beautifully written it was.

Booted footsteps sounded behind her, and Olgierd rounded the table to sit again.

“Breakfast is on its way,” he told her. “You’ll feel more yourself once you have some food in you.”

Her stomach churned at the thought, and he gave her another faint smile.

“Not one for drinking to excess?”

“Not usually, no,” she said, smiling back. She closed the book and slid it carefully his way. “Where’s Vlodymyr?”

“Upstairs. The rest of the band went out for the day. I was about to leave myself if you didn’t make an appearance.”

“I’m glad I didn’t waste the whole day sleeping,” Ciri said. “Vlodimir got the family name of the person who borrowed the manuscript before I could get my hands on it. Van Jonne, outside of Alness. I’d like to get there today if I can.”

“Van Jonne,” Olgierd said thoughtfully. “Our social circles don’t overlap, though we see them often enough at the Vegelbuds’ horse races. Can’t say if it would be a help or a hindrance for Vlodimir to go with you.”

“Not you?” Ciri asked before she could stop herself.

“I’ve business to take care of,” he said with a shake of his head. “And I’ll want to find Iris, time permitting.”

The moneylender, Ciri recalled. And he’d mentioned last night that if Iris had been with him, her father might have changed his mind. It was worth making an attempt, at least.

Boots clomped down the stairs, and she winced and ducked her head, then winced again at the sudden motion. The noise stopped abruptly, and she heard Vlodimir swear under his breath before starting to walk again, much more quietly.

He dropped onto the bench beside her and gently put a finger under her chin to tilt her eyes to his. Amusement and sympathy shone in his face.

“Show me the rogue that did this to you, skylark, and I’ll teach them a lesson they won’t soon forget.”

“Oh, she’s about yea tall,” Ciri said, gesturing. “Ash-blond hair, green eyes.”

“Last seen at the Alchemy, trying to keep pace with those rotten von Everec men?” he finished with a wink.

“The very one.”

“I feared you might say that.” He took his finger away and leaned against the table. “Seems the rogue in question has been justly dealt with, and she’ll learn her lesson well.”

Ciri sulked into her coffee. He could at least offer to take her head.

She heard soft footsteps and a rustle of skirts, and a plate appeared before her covered in the same breakfast as the past two mornings. Her stomach gave an uneasy flip as Marta retreated to the kitchen.

Olgierd nodded to the eggs and sausage. “You’ll feel better once you have that in you. Go on.”

Ciri steeled herself and scooped up a forkful of her meal. She stuffed it in her mouth before she could reconsider, hastily chewing and swallowing it down. Vlodimir patted her on the back and topped off her coffee.

“That’s the spirit. You’ll need your energy, daffodil. We’re off to Brunwich today, all three of us.”

Ciri’s protest of “But I must go to Alness!” collided with Olgierd’s irritated “I’ve business in Oxenfurt.”

Vlodimir waved his hand. “A day won’t kill either of you. I promise you, Fiona, I’ll travel with you to the van Jonnes’ estate myself tomorrow.”

“And my business?” Olgierd cut in. “*Our* business? It can’t be put off—”

“It can,” Vlodimir interrupted. He reached across the table to grab Olgierd’s wrist. “I’ve faith in you; you know that. If anyone can pull us out of this, it’s you. But take one day. You’re wearing yourself to the bone.”

“Vlod, we’ve no time,” Olgierd said quietly.

“One day,” Vlodimir said again. He pulled back and nodded at Ciri. “Besides, we haven’t shown the best parts of Gustfields to our guest yet, have we?”

A moment’s stillness held Olgierd. Then the tension went out of him, and he sighed at Vlodimir in amused resignation.

“You’re bloody relentless. Very well. One day—so long as Fiona is amenable.”

Ciri took another sip of coffee under Vlodimir’s expectant eyes as she considered the proposal. The responsible thing to do would be to ride to Alness immediately. She’d tarried in the past longer than she should have already.

But the present waited patiently for her; Geralt and Yennefer were right where she left them on the cobblestones before the steps to Corvo Bianco’s front door. Nothing would happen if she took an extra day.

“I’m amenable,” she agreed. She narrowed her eyes at the brothers. “But you have to start letting me pay for my room. It was only meant to be for one night, and now it’s been three.”

They both frowned at that, and Olgierd shook his head. “Nay, you’re our guest. We’ll not retract our hospitality simply because your work’s become a mite more complicated than expected.”

“The coffee costs more than your room does,” Vlodimir said with a smirk.

“Damned if I’m giving it up,” Olgierd said. He smiled slightly at Ciri. “Will it assuage your conscience to buy us supper in Brunwich instead?”

“It’s a start,” she said, and he chuckled.

Vlodimir lightly slapped the table and grinned. “We have a deal. Eat up, snowbird. We’ll ride out as soon as you’ve finished.”

“What’s so interesting about Brunwich?” Ciri asked, spearing another forkful of eggs and sausage.

“It’s an artists’ colony,” Olgierd said. “Or it was originally before more folk moved there. Of all the villages in this region, it’s by far the most picturesque.”

“And it’s right by one of the prettiest lakes in all Redania,” Vlodimir added. He cocked his head at Ciri, mischief dancing in his eyes. “You can swim, can’t you, moondrop?”

“Of course I can swim,” she retorted. “Better than you, I don’t doubt. I learned off the shores of Skellige, not in *lakes*.”

He laughed and reached out to tug at a strand of hair by Ciri’s face. “Then we ought to have a great deal of fun today.”

She took another sip from her cup, and quite unbidden, her eyes fell on the gaping opening in Olgierd’s shirt front where his hairy, freckled chest was exposed. In her stomach, butterflies stirred again.

Ciri could swim like a seal. But she might drown from embarrassment first.

“And here we are,” Vlodimir announced, swinging down from Falka’s saddle. “Miller’s Lake. Well?”

“It’s beautiful,” Ciri conceded.

All of Gustfields had a certain charm to it, and Brunwich, as promised, outshone it all, with flowering trees along the narrow dirt roads and colorful garlands adorning the outside of the painted homes and buildings. The lake was lovely in the early afternoon, a deep blue-green color that glimmered with reflected sparkles of sunlight. She spotted a single row boat out on the water, far off toward the other end of the lake. Other than the lone fisherman, however, it seemed to be theirs for the day.

She dismounted and followed the brothers to a tree by the lake shore where an abandoned boat lay overturned in the sand. Vlodimir ducked down to peer under the boat and rummaged around beneath it.

“Ha!”

He emerged with a triumphant smile and a half-full bottle of what looked to Ciri like home-brewed liquor.

“Look at that,” he declared. “We’ll have a proper drink with our supper tonight.”

“It’s all yours,” Ciri immediately said, and he laughed.

“Wise of you,” Olgierd said as he hitched Barghest to a low branch. “We brew it strong enough to strip varnish from paintings. I’d forgotten about that bottle.”

“It proves the boat’s a safe enough place to leave our valuables for a spell.” Vlodimir tied off Falka’s lead and began to unbuckle his belts. “Months and no one swiped our hooch. You remember that night, don’t you?”

Olgierd’s voice was slightly muffled by his shirt going over his head. “The parts after we were sotted are a bit muddled.”

Ciri tore her gaze away from his bared abdomen and turned her attention to her belts and corset as the brothers bantered. One piece of clothing hit the sand at her feet. Then another. Her boots went next, abandoned next to her sword and dagger. Then—

“You’ve more scars than we have put together,” Vlodimir said with a low whistle. He flinched at Olgierd’s quick jab to his side and added swiftly, “It only adds to your beauty, bluebell. Such souvenirs from combat are to be admired.”

“And I have another one for the collection,” Ciri said, peeling off the bandage beneath her collarbone. She craned her neck to get a glimpse of it. “How does it look?”

“It healed well,” Olgierd told her. “Pink and healthy. I’ve no doubt it’ll fade.”

She smiled at him in appreciation, unable to keep her eyes from wandering over their mostly unclothed bodies as she did.

Gods.

He and Vlodimir were each as burly as the other, broad across the chest and shoulders with hard, muscular arms and sturdy waists. But where she’d been drawn to Eredin’s beauty despite his repugnant personality as a teenager, these two were almost *excessively* masculine, and irritatingly charming.

And the less she thought about the freckles hidden amongst Olgierd’s chest hair, the better.

She pushed down her trousers and tossed them on the pile, brazening it out with her hands on her hips.

“Well? Are we swimming or not?”

Vlodimir stared at her in her underclothes in frank admiration for a moment. His gaze went to the tattoo at the top of her thigh, and a small, teasing smile lit his face.

“Tell me, dove, how many lovers have asked to pluck that bloom?”

Ciri groaned and shoved him playfully, all self-consciousness abruptly forgotten. “You’re—”

“Go on,” he said, laughter bright in his eyes. “Am I awful?”

“The *worst*.”

“It’s unusual ink for a mercenary,” Olgierd observed. “Beautifully done, and quite tasteful.”

Ciri brushed her fingers over the rose tattoo, a complicated swell of emotions rising in her.

“I chose it to match my lover’s at the time,” she said. “And I wasn’t always a mercenary.”

“Your friends in Geso?” Olgierd asked. His expression was knowing.

Ciri nodded. “Bandits,” she admitted. “That’s why that mercenary killed them.”

“Damnable luck.” He inclined his head toward the water. “Shall we?”

They stashed their clothes and weapons in the hollow of the overturned boat, Vlodimir tucking the half-full bottle of liquor carefully away in his robe for safekeeping, and the three of them headed down to the lake together. Vlodimir picked up the pace and strode ahead, almost charging into the shallows with boyish glee.

Warmth prickled against Ciri’s bare skin, and she shivered as Olgierd leaned in to speak in her ear.

“Vlodimir has the right of it. Your scars don’t detract from your beauty.”

She missed a step and stared at his back as he walked on, her heart pounding like mad. He couldn’t be flirting, not after last night. Not with how lovingly he spoke of Iris.

Could he?

The cold water quenched the heat in her face, and she dove beneath the glimmering surface to the dim depths below where everything was silent and still. Seconds passed, then more. Her lungs burned. Then she kicked hard, shooting skyward to emerge, little waves breaking around her.

Powerful arms caught her around her waist and tossed her a few feet away, and she glared at Vlodimir as she splashed back down. He grinned unrepentantly.

“Won’t you swim our way, little trout?”

She shrieked in outrage and shot toward him, her feet churning the water behind her as she reached out for him. He howled with laughter and fended off her downward shoves.

“I take it back, woman, you’re a vicious pike, a true predator of the seas.”

Vlodimir got his arms around her again and heaved her out of the water, sending her flying toward his brother. Olgierd caught her with ease, and he gave her a small smile as she collided with his chest, water crashing around them.

“Caught myself a pike,” he mused. “Dangerous armful.”

Ciri bared her teeth at him. “Let me swim back and bite your brother. Just a little bit.”

A snort of laughter escaped him. He braced his hands on her hips as he turned her back around to face Vlodimir.

“You’re on your own with this one,” he called out, and he shoved her through the water at his brother.

She flew toward Vlodimir, the water cresting on either side of her. He opened his arms wide, and she slammed her hands on his shoulders and pushed down with a laugh as he sputtered and sank.

“Bit him a bit hard,” Olgierd said in amusement. He began to slowly swim away, his strong strokes cutting through the water.

Ciri shrieked again as large hands gripped her thighs. Vlodimir erupted from beneath the lake, laughing loudly, Ciri clinging to his shoulders, and he tossed her a third time, high in the air. She fell back in the lake with a loud splash, giggling, and sent a wave at him in retaliation.

He dashed the water from his face and grinned at her. “Race me to the boat.”

“No wager?” Ciri prodded him, grinning back.

“I know better than to wager with you, siren,” he said with a wink. “Up for it?”

“You’re on.”

She sliced through the water in a swift breaststroke, legs kicking behind her. At her side, Vlodimir stayed neck and neck, his legs kicking thunderously and his arms cleaving the water. The lakeside passed by, trees and cottages all dotting the edge in a charming display that changed slightly every time she turned her head for a breath. Her arms began to ache, her legs tire, but she refused to lose.

They slapped their hands on the side of the boat at the same time, laughing breathlessly. A ruddy face topped with a broad straw hat peered down at them in ire.

“‘Ey, youse two are scarin’ off the fishes. Stay on the other side of the lake, why don’t youse?”

“Our deepest apologies, good peasant,” Vlodimir said, smiling up at the fisherman. “We didn’t intend to come between you and your livelihood. We’ll be on our way.”

The fisherman scowled, and Vlodimir caught Ciri up by the waist and started swimming away, dragging them through the water one-armed as she laughed and hit his shoulder in protest.

“Let me go, you—”

“Oh, say it again, it’s so charming in your accent.”

She laughed louder. “You are, you’re *awful* and you know it!”

“Awfully handsome and horribly dashing to boot,” he agreed cheerfully. He stopped to tread water, still holding on to Ciri, and nodded to a redheaded figure in the distance floating

serenely on the top of the lake. “We shouldn’t interrupt that peaceful scene, now, should we?”

They exchanged conspiratorial smiles. He let go of her waist, and they swam stealthily toward the oblivious Olgierd. The merest ripples rose in their wake. Slowly, silently, until—

Olgierd flipped over and grabbed onto Vlodimir, wrestling him down beneath the surface. Ciri cackled. She swam a short distance away and treaded water, her eyes on the deep blue-green depths below.

They burst back up, gasping for air, their arms tight around each other as they grappled. She caught sight of a broad, beaming smile on Vlodimir’s face as real laughter, honest and free, escaped Olgierd. Down they sank again.

Long seconds passed. Dim shapes moved beneath her. Then—

Ciri flailed at the water, plunging her hands down to brace on bare shoulders as two pairs of hands grabbed her thighs and ass and flung her skyward. She flew up a few feet and crashed down in an almighty splash, loud laughter accompanying her descent.

She spun around and swept her arm at them, swamping them both with a wave of water.

“You’re both”—she caught herself and smiled at them helplessly—“very annoyingly likable, aren’t you?”

“It’s the von Everec charm,” Vlodimir said. He swiped water from his face again. “Few can resist it.”

Olgierd jerked his head at the docks a few dozen yards away. “I’ve had my fill if you have. Care to dry off?”

“The race tired me a bit,” Ciri said. “I could stand to get out.”

Small waves rose as Vlodimir shrugged. “It’s all the same to me.”

They swam toward the docks together, Olgierd and Vlodimir keeping pace on either side of Ciri as she made her way toward the shore. Once they reached the wooden walkway reaching out into the lake, the brothers wordlessly reached for her again and boosted her up onto it before hoisting themselves out.

Ciri lay down on the sun-warmed wood, her hands behind her head, and squinted up at the clouds scudding past. Soft sounds told her the brothers had followed suit.

“That one looks like a pear,” she said, taking one hand from behind her head and pointing skyward.

“You think so? Looks more like a demijohn of vodka to my eyes,” Vlodimir said. “What do you think?”

Olgierd hm-ed quietly. “I see a skull.”

Ciri and Vlodimir both scoffed.

“How about... that one?” Ciri said. “I think it looks like a ship.”

“Bloody strange ship,” Vlodimir disagreed. “That’s an anvil.”

“Headsman’s block,” Olgierd said dryly.

Ciri groped along the dock until her fingers found a discarded piece of fishing net, and she flung it blindly toward Olgierd’s voice. His low chuckle told her she’d hit him.

“I take it back; you’re still awful.”

He hm-ed again. “It’s only a jest. You mustn’t take things so seriously.”

“Hmph.”

The lazy humor in his voice was reassuring, but she remembered the state he’d been in only the night before. It seemed even a day away from his worries couldn’t shake them entirely.

She heard a shifting sound, and Vlodimir stretched out beside her, leaning on one arm. He smiled down at her.

“Now, what sort of cloud is this? Looks a bit like a rare bird to me. A priceless gem. A beautiful bloom.”

“If I look like all those things at once, then there’s something the matter with your eyes,” Ciri teased him.

He winked. “A fair point. Olgierd! What does our cloud look like to you?”

A second passed, then a shadow crossed her face as Olgierd moved to sit by her, throwing her in the shade. He looked at her intently for a moment, and then he smiled.

“Starlight, as you said last night. An unusual sight at this hour.”

Ciri glared determinedly up at the sky as she felt her cheeks heat again. The quiet laughter in response said they both knew exactly what they were doing, the bastards.

“You’re flirting,” she accused him when her embarrassment had faded enough to meet his eyes.

“It’s a fine day and a harmless pastime,” he said with a laconic shrug. “Iris has my devotion, always, but there’s nothing wrong with giving a pretty woman a compliment or two.”

She couldn’t help the way her heart fell at that. Of course he hadn’t meant it. She pushed aside her disappointment and changed the subject.

“Lidia spoke to me,” she said.

“That woman can’t resist the urge to chat,” Olgierd said.

Ciri glanced between them. “She told me about Agneta and Stefan.”

“Ha! Now that was a boar hunt for the history books,” Vlodimir said with a laugh. “And the feast we had afterwards, oh, truly a thing of wonder.”

“And Agneta?” Ciri nudged his calf with her toe. “I heard you, what was it? Took her out to see the sights, bought her baubles, and tipped her into bed.”

Vlodimir snorted and shook his head. “Not I.”

“Hadh’t yet met Iris,” Olgierd said, though a small smirk played around his lips.

Ciri rolled her eyes and sat up slightly, propping herself up on her elbows to see them better.

“You decided within minutes of meeting me,” she said. Her gaze went from Olgierd’s to Vlodimir’s and back. “Why?”

If it had been the very clothes Yennefer had warned her about, she’d be tempted to laugh. Or scream.

“Most of the band found us, or joined us on the road,” Vlodimir said. He gave her a small, rueful smile. “And as you so aptly pointed out yesterday, apricot, we do attract a certain type of person. They’re all excellent in a brawl or on a raid, the very life of a party, yet—”

“Simple,” Olgierd interrupted. “Easily amused, and easily pleased.”

“Then there are the ones we find,” Vlodimir said. He ran a finger lightly down her bare forearm, only just grazing her skin. “A noble’s man-at-arms, a circus sharpshooter. A Cintran mercenary trained by witchers.”

“We’re covetous, greedy men, or so it’s been said,” Olgierd continued with a wry twist to his lips. He smiled at her slightly. “And we’ve an eye for quality. Some folk are worth the extra effort.”

“You know I must return to my employer,” she told them.

“We know full well,” Olgierd said, “and such diligence is admirable. However, should you find yourself growing tired of fetching tomes for sorcerers...”

Understanding sparked in Vlodimir’s eyes at Ciri’s hesitation. “Ah, you think we’re toying with you, sunbeam? Feigning interest to win you over? Put it from your mind. You’re downright delightful company.”

Ciri dropped back to lie flat on the dock, and she stared up at the sky again.

“I’ll think about it,” she lied.

“That’s all we’d ask of you,” Olgierd said as the brothers lay down again beside her. Their bare arms pressed against hers, warm from the sun and still slightly wet. “Merely the consideration.”

She watched the clouds in silence for a minute, listening to them breathe, terribly aware of just how close they were. Then she raised her arm to point again.

“That one looks like Umbra.”

“Ha! With haunches like that? It’s clearly Falka.”

“You’re both wrong.”

“You’d better mean it looks like Barghest and not something morbid like a gibbet.”

“Yes, Barghest. I see it now.”

Vlodimir’s laughter rang out across the lake, and Ciri searched the sky for another.

“Well, what about that one?”

“That one’s certainly a gibbet.”

“It’s a tree, you clod. Fiona, what do you see?”

Ciri smiled until her cheeks hurt, then smiled some more.

These men. These awful, likable men. Another few days and she’d never be able to pry them loose from her heart.

“I see—”

Flowers in her Hair

Chapter Notes

beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

“We’ll see you back here tonight, then?” Vlodimir asked Olgierd as they rode their horses out of the yard and onto the dirt road that ran along the inn. He raised his eyebrows and grinned. “Unless all goes well, that is.”

Olgierd spared them a distracted smile. “Unless all goes well.”

He was back in his finery from the day before yesterday, resplendent in an embroidered robe and jewels with his saber at his hip. The sunburn across his nose and cheeks took away just a bit from the grand figure he cut. Ciri and Vlodimir were slightly pink themselves after lying out all afternoon, though Olgierd, pale and freckled as he was, had borne the brunt of the sun’s rays.

“Good luck,” Ciri offered.

“And to you.”

He raised his hand in farewell and spurred Barghest down the road toward Oxenfurt.

“Well, dewberry?” Vlodimir said. “Our path’s in the other direction, and it’s quite a ride. Shall we be off?”

“The sooner the better,” Ciri agreed, nudging Umbra with her heels.

He laughed as Falka walked beside her. “That eager to part ways with us? And we had such fun yesterday.”

“No,” she said, and she found that she meant it.

She’d miss them both keenly, strange as it was. Geralt was in for an earful when she got home for not giving her any sort of warning about just how charismatic the brothers were.

The outskirts of the city fell off behind them, and the countryside unfolded into soft fields of grain and neat rows of grape vines, all full of morning workers. Birdsong filled the air above their heads, chirps and twitters ringing out as larks and waxwings swooped and darted in play. The soft scent of flowers, warmed by the spring sun, perfumed the sides of the road.

“You’ll want me out from underfoot soon, anyway,” she said once they’d made it some distance down the road.

“Perish the thought, dumpling,” Vlodimir objected instantly.

“Aren’t you lot planning on riding out on a raid in a few days?”

He gave her the same evaluating look as he had that first morning, before he’d so glibly admitted to killing a man.

“Oxenfurt can only keep them entertained for so long,” he said. “We’ve promised them spoils and excitement, and so we need to hold up our end of the bargain. You’d understand that, given what you said about your friends in Geso.”

Ciri shrugged, slight unease creeping over her. “I suppose. They swept me up in it, took me in when I didn’t have anything or anyone. I wasn’t promised anything more than a place to belong, and for a while, that was them.”

“What were they like?”

“Rotten, amoral little thieves and murderers,” she said. “Just like I was when I was with them. But they were my friends when I needed friends the most.” She cleared her throat and looked ahead down the road. “Can we speak of something else?”

“Of course,” he said, his voice kinder than she’d have expected. Silence fell for a moment, and then he said cheerfully, “Would you like to hear about the first time I rode out on a raid with Falka?”

She glanced at him to see him smiling at her, a playful spark in his eyes.

“Go on,” she said.

“Picture it,” he said, drawing his hand through the air as if painting the scene. “There we were, all riding hard through the outskirts of Velen toward Mulbrydale, where we’d heard some merchants had just passed through with goods worth plundering. All seemed well; the air was clear, no trouble on the horizon, when this feisty girl up and threw a shoe just past the Hanged Man’s Tree.

“Well, there was nothing for it, was there,” he continued with a pat to Falka’s neck. “Couldn’t bloody well raid a village with a lame horse. So, we rode in, meek as can be, and found the farrier. ‘Oh, I can fix this, sir,’ he told me, ‘but it’ll be the better part of a day. Why not have a drink at our tavern?’”

Ciri laughed, and he grinned at her.

“Tavern wasn’t much to speak of,” he said. “Little one-room place with barely enough room for half the band to sit. But the villagers, oh, they emptied their larders when they heard we were waiting on my mare. They roasted chickens, broke out their strongest spirits, even rustled up a fiddler for entertainment. I had a pretty lass with big brown eyes on my lap for the rest of the day.”

“And?” Ciri asked.

“And once Falka was shod again, we’d had such a cracking good time and taken so much of their food and drink already that we thanked them for being good hosts and rode back to Redania.” He laughed at her surprise. “Not the ending you expected?”

“No,” she admitted.

“We still had our sport despite the mishap,” he said. “A lively party without a raid, and plenty of meat, ale, and women. We let them be for the better part of a year after that.”

She snorted in reluctant amusement. “Of course you went back.”

“It’s what we do,” he said with a shrug. “You can’t expect us to leave a village sitting on a trade route alone forever.”

“I suppose not.”

A comfortable silence fell between them as they rode on. After a while, he brightened and leaned down from the saddle to pluck something from a bush by the side of the road.

“For you, jasmine,” Vlodimir said. He proffered the dainty pink bloom and grinned. “It goes well with that fetching sunburn.”

She scoffed and took it from him, tucking it behind her ear. “Are you sure it doesn’t match your sunburn better? We all came out of it rather pink.”

He laughed loudly. “Ah hell, my poor brother. You should see him in the summertime.”

She could imagine it vividly. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes!” He swooped down to pick another flower and reached out to slip it behind her ear alongside the first one. “Once, when we were still pups and had only just started raiding, we went out at the height of summer. He looked like a boiled lobster. There he was, leading the charge, head bright red and hair to match. The yokels thought a demon had descended on their hovels.”

Ciri cackled. “No! Oh, poor Olgierd!”

“Nay, it worked a treat. They hardly put up a fight at the sight of him.” He sighed in reminiscence. “The start of our legend.”

She shook her head at him fondly. “The two of you must have been absolute menaces growing up.”

He shot her a sly, surprisingly sweet smile and leaned down to the side of the road again to pluck another flower.

“Enough about us,” he said, tucking the blossom into her bun. “Tell me about one of your mercenary contracts. You’ve no doubt had some interesting jobs.”

“A few.” She wracked her memory for any contracts she’d taken that didn’t involve monsters in some way and decided to throw caution to the wind. “Sometimes I get hired for my witcher training. That’s almost always interesting.”

“Oh?”

“Mm-hmm.” She glanced at him to see him watching her raptly, still with that sweet smile on his face. “One time, I was hired to guard a merchant caravan in upper Aedirn that was traveling along a road where a forktail nested.”

“Damned exciting! Tell me all about it.”

Ciri smiled back and launched into the story. “Well, to start with, they insisted I ride at the head of the caravan—as bait.”

“The churls!”

“They didn’t think it through at all, however, since their middle wagon was loaded down with cured meats.”

Vlodimir’s shout of laughter startled a bird out of a bush. “Serves the fools right. What next?”

“Just as you’d predict, the forktail ignored me utterly and swooped right down on the wagon, and I had to race back to kill it before it made off with their goods.” She scoffed. “The merchants tried to take the cost of the ruined meat out of my pay. I didn’t stand for that.”

“You know your worth,” he said in approval. “And the forktail? Was it a fierce battle?”

“It was as hard as you might expect for someone who doesn’t have witcher mutations,” she said, “but I was trained well. And they taught me other things at their keep. Blade oils, bombs and the like.”

“Did they teach you their witcher magic?” he asked eagerly. “Those signs they do?”

“They tried,” she said, glossing over the longer and far more difficult explanation. “I never quite managed to learn.”

“Ah, shame that.” He reached down to pluck another flower and leaned over to slide it in her hair. “If I ever meet a witcher, I think I’ll ask him to show me one of those signs. But you’re a marvel as it is! Fighting forktails with naught but a sword and some alchemy. And far comelier than any old witcher, I’d wager.”

She laughed and adjusted the flower. “I’d be careful asking just any witcher to show you signs. Some of them might use Axii and send you on your way without you being any the wiser.”

“I’ll be certain to pick my witcher well, then.” He gave her a boyish smile. “Tell me some more about your adventures?”

“If you tell me some more about what you and Olgierd used to get up to when you were younger.”

“You have yourself a deal.”

Ciri dismounted from Umbra and looked warily about the courtyard of the van Jonne estate. It was a modestly sized manor, gray stone on the bottom story and wood above, with pillars holding up a small balcony capped by a sharply peaked roof. Brightly colored flowers grew in front of the steps in large, fragrant bushes, and shady trees lined the low stone wall fencing in the property. A pretty place, fitting for minor Redanian nobility.

But it was still, eerily so. Not a hand or worker to be seen.

“Does this seem right to you?” she asked Vlodimir.

“Not in the slightest,” he said as his boots hit the ground. “Damned strange. Let’s hitch the horses and see if the lord of the manor’s home to explain.”

With Umbra and Falka hitched to the farthest pillar, they headed up the stairs to knock on the door.

Silence.

Ciri exchanged a look with Vlodimir, and he raised his fist to pound against the wood, four heavy thumps that reverberated through the door and into the space behind it.

She fidgeted as several seconds of silence passed. Then, from within, faint footsteps hurried their way. The door cracked open, and a sliver of a pale face appeared around the edge.

“Father’s not home,” the woman said, her voice low and melodic. There was a slight quaver to it as her single exposed deep blue eye went from Ciri to Vlodimir. “If you’re looking for him...”

Vlodimir gave her a startled look and swept into a bow. “Ilona? Little Ilona van Jonne, with the”—he cut himself off—“Vlodimir von Everec, at your service, with my good friend Fiona. We came to ask about a book.”

The door opened wider to reveal Ilona, and Ciri swallowed against a suddenly dry throat. Wild waves of rich brown hair tumbled past her shoulders, framing a pale, delicate face. Her soft, pouty mouth pulled into a fretful frown as she peered out at them. Those deep blue eyes assessed Ciri and Vlodimir again, sooty lashes blinking slowly. The scent of blackberries and vanilla gently wafted out the door and into Ciri’s nose.

She was utterly gorgeous, and injured, too, from the looks of it. Marring her skin were fading bruises, large ones, that traveled from her cheekbone down her chest and beneath her gown.

“What whoreson hurt you?” Vlodimir demanded, the book forgotten at once.

Tears filled Ilona's eyes, and she pressed a trembling hand to her lips. "Bandits! Brigands! I told Father to leave a guard behind, but no, he insisted he needed both of them to visit family in the north."

"You were attacked in your own home?" Ciri asked.

"Common thugs from Novigrad," Ilona said, nodding. "A gang of them. They burst in and beat me until I told them where our valuables were, and then they rode off. It happened a week ago yesterday."

Something pricked at Ciri, itched at her. Ilona opened the door all the way, and another soft wave of blackberries and vanilla washed over her.

"You'll help?" she asked, stepping past the lintel. She reached out and took Vlodimir's hand in hers. "You'll get our valuables back? The thought of my family returning to find the house bare—oh, I can't stand it!"

"Not to worry, my sweet, we're on the hunt," he assured her. "Tell us everything we need to know."

"Oh, thank you!" she breathed. She pressed her free hand to her chest and blinked back tears. "They were... vicious. Organized. A dozen of them, possibly more—I couldn't tell. They all wore red and black; that I remember, and they had a fondness for jewelry."

"That's a good lead," Ciri said. "Thank you."

Ilona looked over at her and gave her a soft, grateful smile. "No. Thank *you*."

Ciri forcefully quashed the butterflies that threatened to start fluttering.

"Where"—she tried again—"where are your servants? This place is practically abandoned."

"The maid and the cook quit in fright right after the bandits left," Ilona said. "And Father gave the stable hand leave since there were no horses to tend to while he's away with Mother and my brother. It's just..." Her voice trailed off. "It's just me here, I'm afraid."

Vlodimir patted her hand tenderly. "There, there. We'll sort it out for you. Do you have folk to stay with in the meantime, treasure?"

"I do have a friend I can call on," Ilona said, hope coming into her eyes.

Ciri cleared her throat. "I hate to ask, but... someone borrowed a manuscript from Oxenfurt Academy. We came here to find it."

She cursed inwardly as Ilona's eyes grew teary again.

"I only borrowed it out of curiosity! I didn't want anyone to know I was looking at a magical tome about such things! And now it's *gone*, in those scoundrels' hands, and I can *never* show my face at the library again, *oh*, even if it's recovered it will be so overdue—"

“There, there,” Vlodimir said again helplessly. He patted her hand with more vigor. “Fiona and I will see it all brought back.”

“Oh, will you?” Ilona slipped her hand from Vlodimir’s and stepped back beyond the doorway. “Such brave heroes. I never thought what Father said about your family was true, Vlodimir, any of it. And you, Fiona, you look so fierce and lovely—it’s no wonder you two are friends.”

“I’ll be here,” she said as Ciri and Vlodimir both stumbled over their thanks. “Do be safe!”

The door shut with a firm thud, and Ciri exchanged another look with Vlodimir.

“That was—”

“passing strange,” he agreed. He raised his eyebrows at her as they walked down the steps together. “I hadn’t thought my brother had competition for your affections.”

Her face flared with heat, and she braced for his response.

“I like men,” she said evenly. “I like women, too.”

“And what’s not to like about women?” he asked, slinging an arm around her shoulders. “They’ve so many delightful charms.”

Tension fled her in a flood of relief. She beamed at him and reached up to her hair to pull a flower free.

“I rather like you, Vlodimir von Everec,” she said, and she tucked it behind his ear.

“So long as I’m still trouble,” he said with a wink.

“Always,” she told him, unable to keep the fondness from her voice.

They unhitched their mounts and got back in the saddles, and as they slowly made their way back out of the estate’s courtyard, Ciri glanced behind her to see the curtain twitch and fall back into place.

“I know why I thought it was strange,” she said slowly, “but why did you?”

“Noble parents leaving their unmarried daughter alone and unchaperoned for weeks on end?” he said, holding up a finger. Another rose to join it. “*Flirting* with me, petal, that’s an oddity coming from a noblewoman given my family’s current circumstances and the scrape she was in a week ago.”

He held up a third finger. “And strangest of all—when last I saw that girl years ago, she was plain as porridge, bordering on unfortunate looking.”

“She could have had an exceptionally blessed adolescence.”

“I suppose she did, at that,” he said. He shrugged. “What did you find strange about it?”

“Her bruises,” Ciri said. “Something about them didn’t seem right.”

“They looked real enough to my eyes,” he countered.

“No, they were definitely real. It’s something else. It’ll come to me; I’m sure of it.”

“No doubt it will.”

They turned their horses onto the road that would eventually lead them back to Oxenfurt, and Vlodimir said brightly, “Well, you’ve a new lead, at least. A gang of ruffians in Novigrad. It’s too late to head there today, but tomorrow’s as good a time as any.”

“A gang dressed in red and black with a fondness for jewelry,” Ciri sighed. “That shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

After getting caught up with Whoreson’s gang in Novigrad several years ago, tangling with that city’s underworld in any era was the last thing she wanted to do.

“I’ve never heard of such a gang, to be honest,” Vlodimir said. “Olgierd might have more information for you.”

“I’ll be sure to ask him, then.”

Vlodimir leaned down from his saddle to pluck another flower, and he reached out to slide it into Ciri’s hair amongst the dozen or so other little blossoms nestled there.

“I knew our path would lead us to Novigrad,” he said with a cheeky smile. “Still not interested in those salons? We could take the weekend. Arts and culture by day, hunting bandits by night—”

She shook her head at him and laughed. “I’m not sure which would be less fun.”

“Ah well, it was worth a try.” He squinted toward the horizon, his smile falling from his face. “Is this book of yours worth all this trouble you’re going to?”

Ciri sighed again. “It had better be.”

“Shouldn’t your band be back by now?” Ciri asked as they left the Black Mare’s stable behind and headed for the inn.

It was long past supper; twilight painted the sky a soft purple at the horizon, fading into a deep blue above, and the first stars had just begun to emerge. Crickets, emboldened by the warm spring, chirped beneath the lilac bushes.

But well over half the stalls in the stable stood empty. Olgierd’s dapple-gray Barghest was there, and a solidly built chestnut workhorse Ciri assumed belonged to the inn, but other than that, their band was clearly still out enjoying what entertainment Oxenfurt had to offer.

“They ought to be,” Vlodimir said. “The day gets stranger by the hour, doesn’t it?”

He opened the door and gestured for her to enter.

The common area stood dim and quiet, and for a moment, Ciri thought she and Vlodimir were alone. Then Olgierd's voice came out of the corner, hard and bitter and mildly drunk.

"See you two enjoyed yourselves today."

Ciri's hand flew to the flowers threaded into her hair and tucked into her bun. Vlodimir crossed his arms and stared back.

"We had a splendid time—beautiful day, charming conversation, delightful company."

"Mph."

Ciri and Vlodimir crossed the room to join him at his table, where he sat with a small glass and a bottle of vodka that, judging by its level, he'd been partaking of for a while. He acknowledged them with a humorless twist of his lips and a salute of his glass, and he downed its contents.

"Where are the others?" Vlodimir asked as he and Ciri sat at the opposite bench.

"Ran into Leon and Filip on my way back," Olgierd said. "I told them to spread the word to stay in Oxenfurt the night. I didn't want them here."

"It went that poorly, did it?"

Olgierd grunted again and poured another measure of vodka in his glass. "You were right about the moneylender by the gallery. Whoreson recognized me straightaway. Was right pleased to offer me a loan, in fact, so long as I put up collateral. You ought to have seen how his eyes gleamed when he set them on my sword. On the bloody livery collar. The man hasn't the standing to wear one. I expect he might have pried the jewels loose and sold the metal for scrap if I'd taken him up on it."

Vlodimir glanced below the table and looked back up in relief. "Still have the sword, though, so you put up something else, I take it?"

"I left," Olgierd snapped. "I still have my dignity, damn it. I'll not let a fucking usurer make a mockery of our family."

He knocked back his glass again.

"Did you find Iris?" Ciri ventured to ask.

Olgierd twitched, like he was suppressing a flinch. "I found her," he said quietly.

"And?" Vlodimir prodded him.

Olgierd sat in silence for a long moment, and he reached for the bottle again. "I asked her to elope with me," he said at last, his voice dull. "To leave this all behind, start anew somewhere else."

Vlodimir went still. On the table, his hand slowly curled into a fist.

“She refused,” Olgierd continued. “Won’t take a step that might offend her family. And so here we are, her wedding imminent, and I can’t do a damn thing to stop it.”

“You’d leave us.”

Olgierd set the bottle down carefully at Vlodimir’s low, furious words. Ciri pushed herself against the wall and watched silently, her chest twisting in discomfort.

“Vlod.”

“You’d leave the band we built,” Vlodimir said. The knuckles on his fist went white. “Leave *me*.”

“Bloody hell, Vlod, I love her!” Olgierd said. A tinge of guilt colored the heat in his voice. “I can’t just give her up.”

“And why the hell not?” Vlodimir shot back. “She’s given you up!”

Olgierd exploded out of his seat, sending the bench clattering to the floor. He yanked Vlodimir to his feet by his collar.

“She never has, and she never would!”

“She loves you,” Vlodimir said steadily, his hand wrapped around Olgierd’s wrist. “But she won’t fight for you.”

“Then I’ll have to fight hard enough for the both of us.”

A small, unhappy noise escaped Vlodimir, and he gripped his brother’s wrist harder.

“Why fight at all?” he asked. “You know I believe in you. If anyone can see a way out of this, it’s you. But you’re killing yourself trying to bring it back. Yesterday was the first time in months I’ve heard you laugh like that. Can’t you just... try to be happy with what we have? Let it be enough?”

Olgierd released Vlodimir’s collar and thrust him away.

“Be happy?” he echoed. “*Happy?* Iris made me happy, and she’s betrothed to an Ofieri dauphin. Our home made me happy, and Maximilian Borsodi’s spotty, snot-nosed whelp came and stole it out from under us. Our *status* made me happy, and now our peers won’t even meet our eyes when they pass us on the street. What the bloody hell am I supposed to be happy about?”

“The band,” Vlodimir said. “Us. Me.” He indicated Ciri, still sitting silent and motionless at the table. “A woman with more spirit, brother, someone you don’t have to commit slow suicide to get back—”

Olgierd cut him off with a shake of his head, and after a short pause, he looked away from Ciri.

“I won’t throw away years of love for a Cintran mercenary with no family name who we’ve known for four days.” He glanced back at her apologetically. “No matter how lovely she is.”

A stone sank in Ciri’s stomach, and she dropped her eyes to the table for a moment to regain her composure.

‘*Of Vengerberg*,’ she almost said, and ‘*House of Raven*.’ The name she’d declared for herself in front of the Lodge of Sorceresses, and the name that had been stolen from her, and that was too dangerous to reclaim. She was the daughter of Yennefer of Vengerberg and Geralt of Rivia, the granddaughter of Queen Calanthe of Cintra and King Eist Tuirseach. She wasn’t nameless.

But Fiona of Cintra was.

They’d bought her cover, and that was what mattered. She’d leave, and he’d forget her, and he was right, she knew it—four days of acquaintance with an infatuated mercenary couldn’t compete with a love that spanned years.

Vladimir threw his hands up with a wordless shout of frustration and stomped away. The sound of his boots trailed off into the distance as he clomped up the stairs.

Olgierd sighed and bent to pick up the fallen bench, and he sat back at the table.

“Should I leave you to your drinking?” Ciri asked, half-rising from her seat. She winced at the bite in her voice.

“Nay,” he said. He gestured her back down. The expression he turned her way, though halfway to intoxicated, was wholly remorseful. “That was a churlish thing to say. You’re a beautiful, intelligent woman, and I’ve great admiration for your skills. Forgive me.”

The stone shrank a bit. “Forgiven,” she said. “*If* you share the vodka.”

He passed it her way with a small smile.

“Tell me what you learned from the van Jonnes,” he said. “You came in smiling, so I assume you had at least some success?”

“Not even a little,” she said, making a sour face. “Or, well, possibly a little. Ilona van Jonne—do you remember her?”

“Plain girl,” Olgierd said with a nod. “Sharp as a tack. She borrowed the book?”

“She did, and she’s not plain anymore.” Ciri took a swig straight from the bottle and grimaced at the burn on the way down. “She answered the door covered in bruises and said that a gang of bandits dressed in red and black and wearing jewelry beat her until she told them where the family’s valuables were and then rode off for Novigrad, taking the manuscript with them in the haul.”

He snorted and beckoned for the bottle. “That’s a load of shite.”

She passed it over obligingly. “We thought it strange as well, but it’s our only lead.”

“She’s your only lead,” he corrected her, pouring another shot and passing it back. “Go back in the morning and demand a straight answer. There’s no such gang in Novigrad. Woman’s blowing smoke up your arse.”

“Ugh.”

She took another gulp from the bottle and slumped across the table, shoving it back toward him.

“On the bright side,” he said dryly, “Vlodimir can decorate you with blooms all over again.”

Her hand flew to her hair again as she blushed.

“Nay, keep them in. It’s a charming sight.”

She dropped her hand to the table and slowly sat up. He gave her another small smile and raised his glass to her, drinking deeply.

“A more spirited woman,” he said under his breath, his fingers playing along the rim of the glass. He frowned and looked down. “Hell of it is, Vlod’s not entirely wrong. If Iris had even half your spirit, she’d have jumped on Barghest’s back before I had all the words out.”

“She does love you,” Ciri said softly.

“That’s never in doubt.” He looked at her with a gaze made slightly hazy by alcohol. “He was right about your eyes, too. Greener than my Iris’.”

Ciri’s heart started to speed up despite herself. Flirting again—she shouldn’t, ought not to take it seriously, but there was no humor in his voice this time.

“Your lovers must tell you so, I expect.” He reached for the bottle again. “Eyes like that, I’m sure you hear no end of compliments on them.”

“One or two.” Her voice came out remarkably steady despite her racing pulse.

“One or two,” he echoed. “You make a habit of bedding mutes and blind men?”

A faint laugh escaped her, and the corner of his lips quirked up in a one-sided smile. His eyes dropped to her mouth as he raised his glass again.

“You’ve a fair face,” he said. Blurriness was beginning to soften his words. “Fair lips. Your lovers ever compliment you on those?”

Ciri held her breath.

“They’d look a sight lovelier—”

He cut himself off mid-sentence and set his glass down with a clack, closing his eyes and wincing.

“Forgive me,” he said. “Again. I fear the drink has got to me. It’s time I find my bed.”

He braced his hands on the table and stood, looking down at her for a moment. Then he walked around the table and bent to gently, softly, kiss her cheek, his lips damp from the vodka and his moustache bristling against her skin.

“Good night, Fiona.”

She watched him slowly make his way across the common room and up the stairs, her fingers glued to the spot on her cheek where his lips had been.

Ciri eyed what was left of the vodka, but the memory of yesterday’s hangover held up a spectral hand in warning. She stood from the table instead and followed Olgierd up the stairs.

He’d disappeared into his room by the time she reached their shared floor. Her feet slowed as she passed his door, and she stopped, hesitating, still feeling the press of his lips on her skin.

What he’d almost said—it was an invitation, just about, wasn’t it?

No strings attached, no fuss, and she’d leave without ruining everything that lay between him and Iris.

The door opened before she could make up her mind, and Vlodimir stepped out, shutting it quietly behind him. He took in her position at a glance and shook his head.

“He’s soused and angry,” he said, his voice low. “He’ll not treat you as you ought to be treated, nor care for your pleasure in bed. And you deserve better than to be a night’s empty rut and a morning’s regret.”

She crossed her arms defensively. “You keep throwing me at your brother. Am I not supposed to take him up on it when he finally gives in?” She frowned at him. “Why? Why push me at him?”

He came closer, and with just a brief hesitation, he set his hands on her shoulders and looked deep in her eyes. This close, even in the dim light, she could pick out little flecks of gold in his light brown irises.

“All I want is to see him happy,” he said. “That’s all I ever want for him. I’d hoped he might come around and see that he already had that, but I’ll bite my tongue and support him if what he wants is Iris. You, a woman like you, could make him happy. But not like this. Not tonight. Your heart’s too tangled up in him, blossom, and I fear he’d bruise it.”

Ciri sighed and reached out to cup his cheek. “I hope Olgierd knows he has a brother who cares for him so dearly.”

“He’d do the same for me if it came to it,” Vlodimir said.

She leaned forward and kissed his other cheek, just where Olgierd had kissed hers. His stubble prickled slightly against her lips, and the warmth of his skin lingered on them as she pulled away.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” she said softly as he released her shoulders.

“Sleep well.”

She could feel his gaze on her back as she went down to her door and let herself in. Once it was firmly shut behind her, she slumped against it and closed her eyes.

Geralt would never hear the end of it for not properly warning her. And she’d likely never hear the end of it from him, either.

More Questions than Answers

Chapter Notes

Beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

“Back to Alness, eh rosebud?” Vlodimir winked at Ciri from over Falka’s back.

“There’s nothing else for it,” she said.

She snuck a glance at Olgierd as she adjusted Umbra’s saddle. He was pale and subdued this morning, though not hungover. He’d treated her courteously over breakfast, as if nothing untoward had happened last night, but there was a distance there that hadn’t been there before.

“And you’re Oxenfurt bound again?” Vlodimir asked his brother.

“Need to round up the lads,” Olgierd said tersely. It seemed he hadn’t entirely forgiven Vlodimir his words about Iris. “After that...”

“We’ve run out of moneylenders.”

“I know.”

“What’s left, then?” Vlodimir gave Falka a pat on the cheek and led her out of her stall.

“Magic?”

“Don’t be daft.”

“It’s only a jest.” He sighed and added more sincerely, “I’m with you. Whatever you decide to do.”

The tense set of Olgierd’s shoulders loosened a bit, and he nodded at Vlodimir.

“I realized what was off about Ilona’s bruises,” Ciri interjected.

Vlodimir and Olgierd turned their attention to her. “You did say something about that yesterday,” he said. “Go on, then. What’s wrong with them?”

Ciri tested Umbra’s girth and, satisfied, led her from the stall. “They’re too big to have been made by human hands, and they don’t have the right shape to them to have been made by a cudgel or a mace. So, failing that, she either fell down several flights of stairs or tangled with a monster.”

“A noblewoman, fight a monster?” Vlodimir asked. “That wilting violet who couldn’t stop crying?”

“The suspiciously beautiful woman who wore her hair long and loose,” Ciri said, “like a sorceress.”

“Little Ilona?” He gave her an incredulous look. “She’s grown far fairer than I remember, I’ll grant you that, but a sorceress?”

Ciri shrugged. “Did her family ever send her off for schooling elsewhere?”

The brothers exchanged a look, and Olgierd shook his head. “Nay. Though now that you mention it, I recall her father saying she’d been sent off to stay with relatives in the countryside some years back.”

Vlodimir whistled under his breath, long and low.

“Bloody hell,” Olgierd muttered. “You two, take care. A sorceress makes for a formidable enemy.”

“We’ll come back in one piece,” Vlodimir assured his brother.

“Do so. I only have one brother, after all.”

Vlodimir laughed and joined them in the aisle, Falka trailing after him. He clapped Olgierd on the shoulder with a grin.

“It’ll take more than some wench with magic to do me in. Sword in hand facing a dozen men, that’s how I want to go out.”

Olgierd shook his head, smiling slightly. He met Ciri’s eyes and jerked his chin at the far end of the stable. “A word before you leave, if you don’t mind.”

Ciri followed him down the aisle, Umbra’s reins in hand. They reached the wall, and she waited patiently for him to speak. After several seconds, he finally did, his voice heavy with regret.

“As I said last night, the drink got the better of me. But there was no cause for me to treat you so shabbily.”

“It’s fine,” she said, waving a dismissive hand. “It’s not the first time I’ve been drunkenly propositioned.”

He frowned. “It isn’t fine. I haven’t been such a man in years, and I hate to think I’ve given you reason to believe that about me. I’d never disrespect Iris sober, and I’d not thought I’d do so drunk.”

Ciri bit back the observation that what was on a sober man’s mind often came out on a drunk man’s tongue. It was hardly helpful, no matter how she felt about yet another unintentional slight.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. She pasted on a smile she didn’t feel. “I know you wouldn’t betray Iris. Not over me.”

Not over a Cintran mercenary with no family name.

He glanced away with a grimace. “Hell, that’s not—”

“It’s fine,” she said again. “We’ll see you this evening.”

She led Umbra back up the aisle toward Vlodimir, and they walked out the stable together and mounted up. He gave her a long look, and she raised her eyebrows and nodded toward the road.

“To Alness, then?”

“Very well,” he agreed, nudging Falka’s sides. He called back over his shoulder to Olgierd as he emerged with Barghest. “We’ll see you tonight—best of luck to you!”

“Luck to you as well,” Olgierd called after them.

Ciri and Vlodimir rode down the dirt road in silence for a few minutes. It was overcast today, not quite threatening rain, but gray where yesterday had been blue and bright. The birds were less playful, the flowers less fragrant without the sun to warm them.

“He’s occasionally a clod,” Vlodimir said once they’d made it some distance from the inn.

“He had a point last night,” Ciri said. “The two of you have only known me a handful of days. And I’m not staying.”

“Thought you were considering it?” He scoffed. “Don’t let my brother’s behavior drive you off, moonbeam. He’s rash lately, too in his own head over this mess with the Bilewitzes and trying to get our estate back. But he’s a true cavalier, and you’re a fine woman. Any other occasion and he’d see that clearly.”

The hard knot that rejection had left in her stomach unclenched at the honesty in his voice. She smiled a bit, then looked at him seriously.

“You don’t think he’ll succeed, do you?” she asked. “Not with getting your fortune back, not with Iris, not with any of it.”

He dropped his eyes to the reins in his hand. “If anyone can do it, Olgierd can.”

“But?”

“Ha.” He glanced back up and smiled at her ruefully. “He’s my brother, petal. My best mate. If he decided he wanted to conquer Zerrikania, I’d help him raise an army. I’ve said my piece to him. Now all I can do is catch him if he falls.”

“He won’t have far to fall with you to catch him,” Ciri said.

Vlodimir gave her an emphatic nod. “Never.”

She reached across the small gap between their horses and gently squeezed his hard forearm. “He’s lucky to have you.”

“He’s my brother,” he said again, resting his hand on hers. “I’d do anything for him.”

There was something wistful in his gaze as he looked at her, something soft and almost sweet.

“Mind you,” he said with a wink, “even if he can’t see what a catch you are, I have keener eyes.”

Ciri pulled her hand back out from beneath his as her fickle heart gave a gentle flutter.

“Do you want to race again?” she suggested. She pointed down the road to a tree in the far distance. “To there. No stakes, just...”

“I’ll never turn down a race,” he said, cheerful again.

He slowed Falka to a halt, and Ciri drew Umbra up short beside him. They bent over the mares’ necks, reins in hands, and grinned at each other.

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

“Go!”

Vlodimir pounded on the door of the van Jonne manor as Ciri glanced around the courtyard. Somehow it seemed even more abandoned than it had the day before, even more devoid of life.

“Ilona,” he called out. “Come now, treasure, we only have a few questions about this gang you spoke of.”

Bang bang bang.

“Ilona!”

“She isn’t here,” Ciri said after a minute.

Vlodimir left off beating down the door. “So I was coming to conclude myself.” He gave her a conspiratorial look. “Should we let ourselves in?”

“I don’t see anyone around to stop us.”

“That’s the spirit!”

He lifted his booted foot and kicked hard beside the handle. It shuddered a bit but didn't budge. He did it again and again, slamming his heel in hard with a jarring thud, until finally it gave way with the crunching sound of splintering wood around the lock.

Vlodimir set his foot down and shoved it open lightly, giving Ciri a playful bow. "After you."

Inside, it was much like any minor noble's front room, with decorations on the wall, cozy seating, and a large hearth with a sturdy mantel above it. But the space seemed slightly off, the cushions a little askew, the coat of arms on the wall tilted just a bit.

"She was burning something here," Vlodimir said with a nod toward the hearth. "And not firewood, either."

Ciri crossed the room to kneel in front of the hearth, and she carefully sifted through the ashes. Her heart fell as scraps of paper met her fingers. She pulled them free and gently wiped them clean of soot.

"Well?" Vlodimir asked eagerly.

"—icult to control'—difficult— 'but you're making good progress. I knew the b—" She set down the scrap and picked up another. "'Sgrace now'—disgrace, I think— 'but this will turn the tide of opin—' I'm assuming opinion."

"Is that it?"

Ciri squinted at the third scrap. "'—To deal with them if they keep interf—' And that's it. I don't think it's the manuscript."

"Not much to go on."

"So, we'll keep looking."

Ciri stood again and stopped still as she caught sight of the decorations in the center of the mantel.

"What is it?" Vlodimir asked as he joined her.

"I was right," she said, pointing to the collection of jade statuettes staring out at them. "Ilona van Jonne is a sorceress."

Vlodimir bent to peer at the figurine of the nobleman. "That's quite clever, isn't it? Looks just like the old sod."

"It is the old sod," Ciri said dryly. "And his wife, his son, the cook, the maid, and the stable hand. It's called artifact compression."

He lifted a hand to touch the figurine and pulled back at the last moment. "Sounds damned painful."

“Painful and traumatizing, from what I’ve heard,” Ciri said. “And she did it to her own family, and the staff.”

“Not such a wilting violet, then.” He frowned at the morbid little collection. “Can it be reversed?”

“Another sorceress or sorcerer could undo it without too much effort.”

Vlodimir shrugged and gently scooped the six compressed people from the mantel. “There are one or two at the university. Occultists, more like. It wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

Ciri smiled at him. “Chivalrous.”

“Who knows,” he said as he headed back toward the door, “perhaps old van Jonne will be so overcome with gratitude he’ll offer up a hefty reward to his savior. I’m not too proud to turn my nose up at that.”

She waited while he ducked outside, and he came back in less than a minute, smiling cheerfully.

“All safely tucked away in Falka’s saddlebags,” he told her. “Shall we explore the rest of the manor?”

Ciri nodded. “I’ll take upstairs.”

“Shout if you find anything.”

They parted ways at the staircase, and Ciri headed up cautiously. No traps awaited her on the landing, and she heard no sounds of movement, so she proceeded down the carpeted hall with her hand on her dagger, her senses alert for danger.

She found minor signs of a scuffle in the largest bedroom—likely from Ilona not being able to catch both her parents by surprise. But no information. The son’s room was similarly devoid of clues.

“Oh, here we are,” she said in satisfaction as she pushed open the third door.

Ilona’s room was a mess; she’d clearly packed in a hurry yesterday after feeding them that pack of lies to get them to leave. Gowns hung limply out of the wardrobe, books lay scattered across the floor, and her bedding was badly awry.

But the most interesting thing, the promising thing, was the megascope standing abandoned in the corner of the room, with a crystal still in place.

“Vlodimir!” Ciri called out. “I found something!”

His voice came back, faint and distant. “On my way, skylark!”

Quick, heavy footsteps tramped up the stairs and down the hall, and he ducked inside the room to join her.

"I found something as well," he said. "Chains, in the cellar, and dried blood. Great gobs of it, like someone slaughtered a pig."

"That supports my monster theory." Ciri pointed to the megascope. "And with any luck, that crystal will have a useful recording on it."

Vlodimir rubbed his hands together and gave her an eager smile. "Only one way to find out."

Ciri fiddled with the knobs and stood back as an image of a bearded, middle-aged man in upper-class Redanian clothing flickered into existence. His eyes went to a point beyond Ciri, and he addressed an out of sight Ilona.

"I wasn't expecting a progress report for another day," he said. "Has something changed?"

Ilona's voice echoed from the crystal, sounding tense and hurried. *"Yes, something happened! Two people came to the manor looking for the manuscript!"*

"Why didn't you deal with them like the others?"

"One of them was the lesser von Everec," she said, a sneer clear in her voice. "He might not be a threat, but his brother would come looking—in force."

At Ciri's side, Vlodimir stiffened. She stepped closer and slid her hand down his tense arm to rest it on his fist. It relaxed slightly under her touch, and she slipped her hand into his with a small squeeze.

"How is your project?" the man asked. "Is it safe to move?"

"Safe enough, now that I understand the spells better."

"Then come to Tretogor at once. Bring the project—and the manuscript. They might come back."

"I have them chasing phantoms," Ilona said dismissively. "I bought myself a week, at least."

"And if they stop and think, then they'll be back in the morning. Come now."

"I'll be there in an hour. Have a meal ready for both of us. And Albrecht—"

"Yes?"

"Don't command me again."

The crystal dimmed, and the image winked out.

"Well," Vlodimir said with forced cheer. "This book just gets more and more mysterious!"

"Vlodimir..."

He shook his head and let go of her hand.

“Leave it be,” he said. “It’s just a snobby wench’s blather. Now, what have we learned?”

Words of protest, of comfort, rose to her lips but died a quick death at the request in his eyes, and she stifled a sigh.

“I think it’s safe to assume that the ‘project’ is whatever was chained in the cellar,” she said, “and that Ilona got the spells she needed to control it from the manuscript. But I thought it was just a treatise on wards.”

“Clearly not,” he said. “And it’s about vampires, no less! Do you think—”

“that the blood was for a vampire?” Ciri grimaced. “Those bruises could have come from a fleder or a garkain, I suppose. One of the stronger lesser vampires. I’m surprised it didn’t tear her apart with its claws or teeth, and that it only left bruises. But she must have used spells to protect herself.”

“And she took it with her to Tretogor to meet with a man named Albrecht,” he said, rubbing his chin in thought. “She said she’d arrive in an hour. That puts her days ahead of you, and we don’t even have his family name to go on. Tretogor’s not a small city.”

“Then I’d better get going,” Ciri said firmly. “The sooner I get started, the better my chances.”

“We’ll take care of provisioning you back at the inn,” he said as he headed for the door. “Never let it be said that the von Everecs sent you away empty handed!”

Ciri trooped downstairs, her rucksack over her shoulder. The inn was full again, the tables occupied by the returning bandits, and the common area was full of noise and the smell of spilled ale. Vlodimir spotted her arrival and nudged his brother, raising a hand to beckon her to their table.

“Innkeep’s lass is putting together food for the road,” he said as she sat across from them. He pushed a plate her way and nodded to the platter of chicken on the table. “Get some of that in you. You’ll need the sustenance for the journey.”

“Just a quick bite,” Ciri said. “I can’t delay much longer.”

“Stay the night,” Olgierd said. “Leave in the morning when you’re fresh and well-rested.”

She forked a few slices of chicken onto her plate and shook her head at him. “Every minute I give her is a minute I lose. I can’t stay the night.”

He pressed his lips together in a disapproving expression but didn’t argue further. “You have funds for the trip? For inns, food, and the like?”

“More than I thought I’d have at this point, since you two won’t let me pay for anything,” Ciri gently teased him.

That drew a reluctant smile from him. “We do pride ourselves on our hospitality. Even in such base surroundings.”

She held up her fork and pointed the tines at him mock-threateningly as he paused, regret crossing his face once more. “Don’t you dare apologize a third time. Vlodimir said you were occasionally a clod, but if you say you’re sorry again, I may actually believe it.”

He laughed quietly, raising his hands in surrender. “Far be it from me to argue. I am occasionally a clod.”

“Good.” She smiled in satisfaction and lowered her fork.

She turned her attention to her supper as Vlodimir described what they’d found in the manor to his brother.

The faint humor disappeared from Olgierd’s voice when Vlodimir finished summarizing their discovery. “Are you prepared to fight a vampire? Even for a witcher, I hear that’s no easy battle.”

Ciri finished her mouthful and patted her rucksack. “I have blade oils that will make the job easier. And I do have training.”

“A vampire, a sorceress, and a likely sorcerer?” he pressed. He leaned across the table and set his hand on her wrist. “Fiona. Stay the night and rest before you head out.”

“They’re already in Tretogor,” she countered. “I don’t risk anything by leaving now, and I need the head start.”

“Then take care,” he insisted. He gave her wrist a gentle squeeze.

The heat of his hand, broad and callused, stayed on her skin when he pulled away, and she suppressed the urge to rub it.

Vlodimir cleared his throat. “We’ll find someone to reverse the magic on the family while you’re gone.”

“Good. The sooner the better.” Ciri cut off another piece of chicken and popped it in her mouth, and as soon as she’d swallowed it, she continued, “I know someone who’d been compressed like that for forty-seven days once.”

Vlodimir winced. “We’ll not let it go on that long.”

The door to the kitchen swung open across the room, and Marta hurried out with a full cloth sack hanging from one hand. She stopped by their table and set it on the edge with a sharp nod.

“The provisions you asked for. Enough for a week’s travel.”

“Thank you,” Ciri said, and Marta nodded again and turned to leave.

“A moment,” Vlodimir said, rising to his feet.

Marta went tense as she turned back toward the table. “Yes, sir?”

“Here.”

Vlodimir pulled the sheathed knife from his sash and handed it to her, hilt first. She took it like she was being offered a live snake.

“Anyone gives you trouble, just stick them in their soft bits,” he said with a friendly smile.

She stared down at the knife in her hand for a long moment, then looked back up at Vlodimir’s pleased face.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, sounding anything but grateful. “If you’ll excuse me. I have work in the kitchen.”

Vlodimir shrugged at Ciri as Marta rushed off. “I tried, opal.”

“It’ll take more than that to make her feel safe,” Ciri said. “But it’s enough that you tried.”

She shoved a final bite into her mouth and rose, grabbing the sack from the table.

“Off already?” Vlodimir asked.

Ciri swallowed and nodded. “I want to make it some distance down the road while it’s still a bit light out.”

Olgierd got up from the table as well, and he set his hand on her shoulder briefly to turn her toward the door. “Come. There’s one last thing to sort out before you leave.”

She followed the brothers out the door to the stable. Olgierd led the way down the aisle to Umbra’s stall, and he gave her nose an affectionate rub as he unlatched the door and led her out.

“Take the horse,” he said. “You’ll get there faster, and it’ll be a safer journey.”

Ciri inhaled sharply. “That’s far too generous.”

“Then make sure to come back once you’ve finished,” Vlodimir said, his eyes warm. “If only to return her.”

“I will,” she promised at once. “I will, Vlodimir. This isn’t the last you’ve seen of me.”

“We’ll hold you to that,” Olgierd said with another small smile.

The three of them made short work tacking up Umbra, and the brothers walked Ciri out of the stable and across the yard to the dirt road running along the inn.

“Well,” Vlodimir said. “Stay safe, blueberry.”

He held open his arms and raised his eyebrows at her. She laughed and hugged him hard around the shoulders, a bit of tension draining away at the easy warmth in his strong embrace. He planted a swift kiss on her cheek as his hand slipped from her waist to venture further down, and she pinched his side, laughing again at the playful squeeze to her ass.

“You’re awful,” she said fondly, pulling away.

Ciri met Olgierd’s eyes, and their conversations from last night and this morning seemed to pass between them in a wordless instant. She held out a hand for him to shake, certain her feelings were painted across her face.

He took her hand and turned it palm side down, holding her fingers in a gentle grip, and he raised her knuckles to his lips, his eyes still on hers.

“Take care,” he told her again. He blinked and let her hand go, and her breath returned. “And return to us quickly.”

“I will,” she said once more.

She mounted Umbra and rode down the road a short distance, then turned in the saddle to look back. They still stood there, smack in the middle of it, watching her leave. She raised a hand in farewell, and they waved back, Olgierd with a simple gesture, Vlodimir enthusiastically.

“Goodbye!” she called out to them. “I’ll see you soon!”

Before she could get caught in another round of farewells, she pressed her heels into Umbra’s sides and urged her on, down the road and around the bend, until not a soul was in sight. She slowed the mare to a gentle walk and leaned forward to pat her neck.

“This will be a bit strange, girl,” she said. “Try not to panic.”

And she reached for her magic to send them partway across Redania in the space of a heartbeat.

Tongue Sharp and Silvery

Chapter Notes

beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

Ciri stirred her stew and stared out at the occupants of the tavern moodily, watching the latest person she'd cornered for questioning disappear into the crowd. The toe-tapping music coming from the small stage didn't put a dent in her frustration, nor did the hearty meal settle the unease in her stomach.

She'd all but lost the lead she'd gained by teleporting to Tretogor. Over a week she'd spent wandering the city and lurking in taverns trying to find a clue on Ilona's whereabouts or the identity of the mysterious Albrecht, and not a single scrap of information had revealed itself.

Her coin purse was growing thinner by the day. Not even the gwent games she'd struck up would be able to supplement her stay at the inn for much longer. One more day and she'd have to return to Oxenfurt empty-handed, and then back to the present with no solution to Corvo Bianco's troubles.

The music came to a rousing end, then the band struck up another tune. Space cleared before the stage, and a couple started to dance. The woman's skirt flew as the man led her around in a lively jig.

"They look like they're enjoying themselves."

Ciri turned away from the dancers as a man sat down across from her. He smiled and leaned forward, planting his elbows on the table and steepling his fingers together.

"No luck with that guardsman?" he asked. Interest gleamed in his dark eyes.

She set down her spoon and looked him over carefully. "What's your interest in it?"

Her new dining companion was average in appearance, dull almost, with tanned, blunt features, a shaved head, and a commoner's yellow tunic. The only things that stood out were his deep brown eyes, so dark they were nearly black.

"We've patronized the same taverns of late," he said. "You've been *very* busy, poking your nose all around Tretogor, prying for information over games of gwent."

Ciri narrowed her eyes at the man. "I never saw you."

"I'm very good at going unnoticed." He took his elbows off the table to press a hand to his heart, and he dipped a shallow, seated bow to her. "Gaunter O'Dimm, at your service. A

humble merchant of mirrors.”

“And what brings you to my table?” Ciri asked him. “I’m not interested in an idle chat about my failures, and if you want to play gwent, it’ll have to wait until I’m done eating.”

“Gwent is not my game of choice,” O’Dimm said. His smile seemed to sharpen. “And I’m not here to discuss your failures, Fiona—may I call you Fiona? Forgive me; I eavesdropped.”

She gave him a short nod and resisted the urge to cross her arms, or to drop her hand to the dagger at her belt.

“You’re looking for a noblewoman named Ilona van Jonne, here in Tretogor to meet with a man called Albrecht,” O’Dimm continued. “She brought a dangerous package with her; one you refuse to elaborate on when asked about it.”

“You eavesdropped quite closely,” Ciri said levelly.

“Information is currency,” he said. “I couldn’t begin to help you without knowing what you needed. And you do need my help. After all, it’s been days, hasn’t it? Purse feeling a bit light?”

She scowled at him. “Listen, O’Dimm—”

“I can tell you exactly where to find the erstwhile pair you’re chasing so desperately,” he said. He steepled his fingers together again, and a faint, smug smile crossed his face. “For a very small price.”

“Of course,” Ciri scoffed. She gave in and crossed her arms as she glared across the table. “If you think I’m desperate enough to *sleep* with you for information—”

“Not at all!” He tapped his lips with the tips of his joined index fingers and changed the subject abruptly. “Do you know what a good fisherman requires?”

‘Bombs,’ she very nearly said. “Good bait? A sturdy pole? The right stream? Enlighten me.”

“Patience.” He smiled again, and his dark irises seemed to grow even darker. “A fisherman gathers his supplies and heads out at dawn for a likely spot, and he waits for hours for the fish to bite. Some days they never do. Other days the catch is abundant.”

“Not just a mirror merchant, but a fisherman?”

His eyes went flat and cold at her interruption, and a chill traveled down her spine.

“There’s a very particular fish I have my eye on,” he said. “By now it should be eager for the bait on my hook. And yet something has it distracted.”

O’Dimm’s eyes bored into hers. An iron band clamped around Ciri’s ribs as her heart rabbited in her chest.

“You’re scaring away the fish, Fiona,” he said. “Go back to the other side of the lake.”

She jerked back at the echo of what the peasant had said that day they'd swam at Miller's Lake.

Geralt had warned her, he'd *warned* her, and here he was, sitting across from her chatting about fish: a being of 'evil incarnate'. She hadn't meddled, she'd stayed out of their business, and she'd caught his attention anyway.

Her hand twitched toward her dagger, and he simply raised an eyebrow.

"What," she whispered, "do you want?"

"I'll give you the information you require and send you on your way," O'Dimm said. "All you need to do in exchange is tell your hosts in Oxenfurt upon your return that you've decided to part ways with them for good."

"What do you want with *Olgierd*?" she stressed.

"What I want with any who seek my services," he said. "To give him what he most desires. His darling Iris' hand in marriage, his home, and his fortune—all things he desperately needs. I can help him."

"I don't believe you," Ciri said flatly. "You have to want something from him."

"I want what everyone wants," he said, smiling slightly behind his steepled fingers. "A fair bargain."

"I won't let you hurt him." She let her hand fall to her dagger and shifted back on the bench. "I won't let you hurt either of them."

His eyes glinted. "My, what fierce protectiveness, and over men of such poor character. Do you feel as defensive over the peasant villages they ransack for sport?"

She pushed away an unwelcome pang of guilt. Eight days out from Oxenfurt—they'd have gone on their raid by now. But they were the same men who'd taken her swimming and cloud watched with her. Vlodimir had slipped flowers in her hair and treated her better than anyone had when she told him she liked both men and women. And Olgierd...

"I know what they do," she said, tightening her grip on the dagger. "They're still a sight better than most bandits."

"Are they?" He nodded to her hand, hidden beneath the table. "Let go of that hilt, or I'll take it as a threat. You don't want that."

Ciri reluctantly took her hand off the hilt and glared across at O'Dimm. "I know them. They have a code. They're—"

"your friends?" he interrupted. A faint leer colored his voice. "*More?* Pining after a taken man, tsk tsk, and leading on that dimwitted brother of his at the same time. Do you think they value a common mercenary as more than a night's entertainment?"

“*Stop.*”

“I can give you the information you need to solve your problem,” he said, “and it is quite a problem, isn’t it? Or you can let that opportunity slip through your fingers to stand by men who you hardly know, who ransack peasant huts for petty baubles and a laugh.”

Everything in her rebelled at the offer. Leave Olgierd and Vlodimir to this being, this flat-eyed monster who spoke so chillingly, so reasonably, dripping poison and offering honey in turns?

She swallowed and averted her gaze as Geralt’s words returned to her. *‘Some things have to happen. Let them.’*

He’d met the brothers only years before she went into the past. He had Olgierd’s saber on the wall at Corvo Bianco.

Whatever this monster intended, she had to hope they’d survive it. Geralt and Yennefer needed her to succeed.

Guilt curdled in her stomach, cold and sour, and she met O’Dimm’s stare again. “Fine. When I return to Oxenfurt, I’ll tell them.”

“You’ll tell them what?” he prompted her. Satisfaction gleamed in the dark depths of his eyes.

“I’ll tell them I’ve decided to go my separate way, and I won’t take them up on their offer to join them,” she said.

“And you won’t be returning for a visit,” he added.

She nodded wordlessly, her throat too tight for speech.

“Come now,” he tutted, “it isn’t anything you weren’t already planning on. Though no, you intended a softer departure, one that left the door open. But a bargain is a bargain, and so I’ll tell you what you need to know.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table once more. “You seek the townhouse of Albrecht de Rycher, one-time member of the Brotherhood of Sorcerers and graduate of Ban Ard Academy.”

Ciri swallowed against the knot in her throat and focused on the information. “One-time member?”

“He found their ambitions too prosaic,” O’Dimm said with a small, smug smile. “Rissberg’s cohort offered ample new connections to delve into all sorts of interesting fields of study, until a witcher laid their college low a few years ago. Now he’s turned his attention to a young graduate of Aretuza whose ambitions are similarly grand.”

“Ilona,” Ciri supplied.

“The very one,” he said. “Sent away from court in disgrace for lacking political savvy, cooling her heels in her parents’ home until a mage sent her a letter with a question: had she ever heard of Melchior Fabin’s manuscript?”

“I was told it was just a treatise on wards,” she said.

“I think you know better than that by now.” O’Dimm stood from the table and looked down at her. The light behind him cast his face into deep, eerie shadow. “De Rycher’s townhouse can be found north of the town square, a street past the bookseller’s store. Don’t forget our bargain.”

Ciri glared at him. “I won’t.”

He pressed his hand to his heart and bowed again, backing away into the crowded room. She lost sight of him at once, and unease bit her at his disappearance.

She glanced down at her cooling stew and felt her stomach lurch in protest. Grimly, she took up her spoon again and dug into the bowl. It was no good fighting on an empty stomach, and two magicians and a vampire would be a challenge even for her.

Ciri hoisted herself up to the balcony running along the back of the townhouse and landed on it with a soft thump. She held still for a moment, listening for movement, then crept to the door to test the handle.

Unlocked. She was in luck.

She slipped inside and shut it silently behind her. The short hall she found herself in was sparsely decorated, empty save for a single painting of the Pontar at sunset and a potted plant that had seen better days. She unsheathed her sword and fished out her small bottle of vampire oil from the pouch at her belt, unstopping it carefully to let a dozen drops fall down the blade’s length. The bottle disappeared back into the pouch, and she crept down the hall to the door at the end.

Delicately, she eased it open and paused, her ears open for sounds. Faint, indistinct murmurs reached her, a conversation on the floor below. She kept moving along the walkway, keeping her footsteps light and even as she peeked through the doors along the halls.

Bedroom, bedroom, *study*.

She entered it quietly, leaving the door ajar behind her to listen for the murmur of conversation below. Packed bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, crammed in alongside shelves of arcane tools and artifacts Ciri only vaguely recognized. A desk in the corner, piled high with papers, seemed like her best bet.

Ciri sifted through the notes and correspondence carefully, keeping one hand on the hilt of her sword as she did. Letters from Ilona detailing her progress with the ‘project’ that abruptly cut off—that must have been when she obtained a megascope. Notes on containment and

pacifying spells, a firm rebuttal from a member of the Brotherhood of Sorcerers, a draft of a letter, recipient unknown, offering an army of untold strength and ferocity—

She set the papers aside, and felt a small, satisfied smile cross her face at the sight of the thick, plain manuscript, bound in blank paper and string.

“There we are,” she murmured.

“Yes,” a cold voice said from the doorway. “There we are indeed.”

She stiffened and whirled around, raising her sword. The conversation. She’d stopped listening for it.

A middle-aged man with a salt and pepper beard she could only assume was Albrecht de Rycher stood in the doorway, Ilona just beyond his shoulder. His pale blue eyes were as cold as his voice. And looming behind them, its grotesque, alien face strangely placid, a fleder stood, swaying gently from side to side.

“Whoever you are, and whoever your employer is, I won’t tolerate competition,” de Rycher said. “Ilona?”

“It can’t be the von Everecs,” Ilona scoffed. Her pretty face was hard and entirely dry of tears. “They barely have the coin to keep an inn’s roof over their heads. No, I’d presume she has funding elsewhere and fell in with them out of convenience.”

“It hardly matters,” he said dismissively. “She’s seen too much. Deal with her, dear.”

Ilona stepped past de Rycher and raised her hands. A wicked smile curved her lips, and she began to form the words to a spell Ciri could only guess at.

Ciri shot across the room in a flicker of pale green light. *Zireael* cut through Ilona’s chest with a wet thunk. The sorceress stared at her in pained disbelief, then slid from her blade to the floor in silence.

“Disappointing,” de Rycher said, staring down at Ilona’s corpse. Levelly, without raising his voice, he said to the fleder in Elder Speech, “*Kill her.*”

The fleder rushed past de Rycher, its face animated in a rictus of fury and its claws outstretched. Casually, almost as an afterthought, de Rycher summoned fire to his hand and tossed it at the desk as he turned to leave.

Ciri cursed and spun out of the way of the oncoming claws. They raked down through the air, perilously close to her skin. The fleder snarled and swung at her again, fangs bared.

She ducked another powerful swing and slashed out with her sword, cutting deep into the vampire’s muscular torso. It howled and spat furiously and wrenched free of her blade. She backed away warily, sword raised, and cursed again as it barreled toward her.

Its claws dug into her shoulders even as her sword sunk into its stomach. Hot, fetid breath stinking of blood heated her face. It staggered forward, lowering its fangs to her neck as it

shoved her backward.

She freed herself with a wild gasp of magic, blood and pale green light streaking behind her as she shot to the burning desk.

“No no no no,” she muttered, frantically slapping out the flames with a nearby book.

Ciri spun back at another snarl and hacked inelegantly across the dying fleder’s thick neck. It staggered again and collapsed, its beady eyes rolling back into its head.

“No!”

She shoved the smoldering correspondence to the floor and grabbed the scorched manuscript. Flames had crisped the cover and the edges, curling and blackening the pages and burning holes in the blank cover. She flipped through it desperately.

Intact. Thank all the *fucking* gods.

Ciri raced back along the walkway to the short hall leading out to the balcony and flung herself out the door, then down the side of the building, barely holding in a yelp of pain as her injuries protested the movement. She stopped, her heart pounding, and listened for a moment.

“—young woman, dark blond hair with white streaks and a scar on her face,” de Rycher said loudly, his voice filled with distress and echoing across the roof of the townhouse. “She just broke in—she had a sword! She killed my guest!”

She cursed under her breath a third time, and with another pull of her magic, she left the scene of the crime behind and stepped into her room at the inn.

Her rucksack lay by the foot of the bed; she grabbed it and tore its contents free to scatter them across the covers, discarding her bloodied sword beside them as well. In the manuscript went, then her toiletries and clothes. Her sword received a hasty cleaning before being slid back in its sheath on her back, still faintly wet with traces of oil and blood.

She cinched the rucksack shut and tossed it and the sack of provisions over her shoulder, racing out the door and down the stairs. She barely slowed to leave the room key at the inn’s counter as she went.

The stables were blessedly empty save for one idle hostler, and she led Umbra out of her stall and over to her tack. With quick, steady hands, she tacked her up, wincing every time she raised her arms, one piece after another, as her borrowed mare stood calmly in place. She gave the girth a second check and mounted up with another wince, pressing her heels into Umbra’s side.

Umbra walked out at a brisk pace, not too fast for a city’s streets. Ciri’s fists clenched around the reins, her muscles tense and her stomach in knots, the puncture wounds in her shoulders throbbing in time with her heartbeat.

Somehow, she had the devil's own luck. No one spotted her. No one stopped her. Bleeding, injured, and exhausted, she rode straight out of Tretogor's city gate without any trouble at all. Once out of sight, she lightly kicked Umbra into a gallop. They tore off into the surrounding countryside like a pack of hounds were at their heels.

Ciri didn't stop riding until nightfall, not until she'd put hours between her and the city. She slipped wearily from Umbra's back and rubbed her damp neck, praising her beneath her breath as she led her to a tree to hitch her in place.

"That's my sweet girl," she said, slipping off the bridle and bit to replace them with a halter and rope. "Swifter than the wind and braver than a Skelligan warrior."

Umbra blew warm air at her and stood patiently as Ciri retrieved her nosebag and feed from the sack of provisions. With a final pat to the contentedly chewing mare's cheek, she turned to sort out a small fire with the dry wood and tinder scattered around just off the road.

It took a few tries with her shoulders aching as they were, but at last the tinder caught, and her small campfire burned cheerfully. She collapsed down beside her rucksack with a groan and painfully started to remove her belts and corset, stripping down to her bra to reveal the damage the fleder had done.

Deep, ugly puncture wounds, still glistening wetly and only just beginning to scab around the edges, stared up at her from the meat of each shoulder, three on each side. She sighed and reached for her rucksack to dig for her medical supplies, and she hissed at the sting of the spirit as the alcohol burned away the potential for infection.

The shirt was a loss, torn and bloody as it was. She ripped it apart and bandaged herself with its remains economically, applying more spirit and a generous dollop of Yennefer's ointment as she did. With a low, tired sigh, she reached for her rucksack to dig out a new shirt, and she tugged it on carefully.

The wide mouth of her bag was shadowed and dark in the flickering light of the campfire, but she could still see the partially burned manuscript within. With gentle hands, mindful of the blackened, flaking edges, she pulled it from the rucksack and flipped it open to peer at the pages.

Tiny print crossed the pages, barely readable by the dim, shifting fire. She squinted and brought it closer to her face.

An introduction—uninteresting.

She skipped forward a few pages and stopped at the sight of an intricate design, far more complex than the ones Yennefer had made her practice at the Temple of Melitele over and over. 'To bar plumards from a building or residence', the caption beneath claimed in plain words. The facing page was full of cramped, dry writing detailing exactly *how* one was supposed to do that. She turned the page, then turned another. It went on in exhaustive detail, chapter after chapter—plumards, nekurats, garkains, everything but higher vampires.

Just like Yennefer had said.

And still there was a significantly thick section left. She edged closer to the fire and flipped the page again.

There, just like she'd seen copied out on de Rycher's desk. Spells for pacification. Spells for containment. Spells for obedience and dominance. Each meticulously explained, vampire by vampire.

Ciri shut it and stared into the fire.

It was no wonder Melchior Fabin had been killed on the streets by vampires if this was the work he'd been doing. If Yennefer used these wards, every vampire in Toussaint would know exactly where she got the information, and then they'd never have a moment's peace.

But she'd promised to bring it back. She had to hope that Yennefer would see a solution she didn't.

She slid it back into her rucksack and lay down next to the fire, pillowing her head on the bag.

"That was a disaster," she told Umbra.

The mare nickered at her softly.

She had no idea how Albrecht de Rycher had explained the fire and the fleder corpse to the guards he'd reported her to, but that was a dangerous loose end that she couldn't afford to go back to tie up. She could only hope his destruction of his own notes would curtail his ambitions—and that he wouldn't remember her too clearly when she returned to the present.

And O'Dimm.

She shivered despite the warmth of the night, the memory of that cold, flat stare sending chills down her spine again.

He wanted Olgierd, wanted Ciri out of the way, and she'd just *agreed*. Sour guilt rose in her stomach. She clenched her hands at her sides.

She could have fought him. Damn the future, damn the consequences. The manuscript was likely worthless, anyway.

'Some things have to happen. Let them.'

"Shut up."

It was done, and there was no taking it back. All she could do was cling to what Geralt had said before she'd left, and to the memory of Olgierd's sword on Corvo Bianco's wall. They'd survive O'Dimm. They had to.

And she had to tell them farewell, for good.

But not for another several days. She couldn't arrive back to Oxenfurt freshly injured—they wouldn't be able to overlook that, or the suspiciously good time she made on a trip to and from Tretogor.

She ignored the part of her mind that said to delay longer, that putting off a goodbye meant it never had to happen.

She adjusted her bulky pillow beneath her head, the dirt hard and unforgiving beneath her back, and settled in for the night. The crackling flames and Umbra's soft noises offered a gentle counterpoint to her unsettled, guilty thoughts.

The specter of dark, flat eyes pursued her into a restless sleep.

Warm Welcomes and Cold Comfort

Chapter Notes

beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

Ciri rode into the Black Mare's yard three evenings later, tired, dirty, and saddle-sore. The half-healed puncture wounds in her shoulders were little more than old scabs ready to turn into new scars for the collection thanks to Yennefer's ointment. But still they ached and pulled when she lifted her arms or hefted a heavy burden.

She dismounted with a groan of relief and held on to Umbra's saddle as she stretched her legs. The sweet mare swung her head around to nicker at her softly, and she patted her neck.

"Almost back to the stables, girl."

Umbra followed her across the yard to the stable doors and waited for Ciri to slide it open. She gave it a yank and turned abruptly at the sound of the inn's door slamming open.

"Fiona!" Vlodimir shouted, striding toward her with a beaming smile. "Saw you through the window. You made excellent time."

He grabbed her up in a hug as soon as he reached her, and he spun her around with a laugh. She held on and hugged him back fiercely, ignoring the dull throb in her shoulders as she sank into his firm chest.

"But you're injured," he said as he set her back down. He frowned at the bandages peeking out from beneath her shirt collar. "You'll have to tell us all about it inside. After you've had a nice, relaxing soak," he added with a wink.

She wrinkled her nose in agreement. "I did stop at an inn a night ago and washed up some there, but—"

"You've had a long journey," he interrupted and reached past her for Umbra's reins. "None of us return from a raid smelling like roses. Let's get this fair lady back in her stall and see to your comfort after."

"Umbra first," she said with a nod.

He grinned. "You understand."

They went into the stables together, Vlodimir leading Umbra and Ciri trailing tiredly behind them. A young man she didn't recognize, straw-haired and ruddy-cheeked, jumped to his feet from a stool in the corner with nervous energy. Vlodimir waved him back down.

“We’ll tend to our own mounts. Though... run and tell your wife the von Everecs’ guest has returned and will need her room again, and a bath drawn for her.”

The man nodded and hurried out the door, though not without giving Ciri a wary, curious look. She stifled a yawn and followed Vlodimir over to the wall where the racks were, and together they began to remove her tack.

She reached up to hang the bridle, doing her best to hold back a wince as the movement stretched her still healing injuries.

“Allow me, petal,” Vlodimir said. He grabbed the bridle from her hands and finished putting it away. “Why don’t you keep me company while I tend her?”

She nodded and leaned against the wall. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

Ciri watched as he untacked Umbra and set all the different pieces away where they belonged, every movement so smooth and assured she imagined he could care for a horse in his sleep. He grabbed a currycomb from a shelf and turned back to Umbra, running his free hand over her back gently.

“No saddle sores,” he said. “Not listless or irritable, eyes bright, no inflammation in her joints, head held proudly.” He smiled at Ciri. “You treat your mounts well.”

“She treated me well,” Ciri replied. “I couldn’t have done it without her. Swift and brave and obedient—the perfect horse. Thank you for the loan.”

“She’s had a worthy rider these past weeks,” he said as he started to run the currycomb over Umbra’s back. Dust and hair rose in small plumes with each firm stroke.

“Did you get the van Jonne family and their staff sorted out?” Ciri asked.

He threw back his head and laughed. “Did we! Found myself a sorcerer at the Academy guest lecturing and brought him the problem. He reversed the compression right there and they all sprang back to life spitting mad and thirstier than a horse after a race. Old van Jonne said outright Ilona was no daughter of his and to send word to Tretogor for her arrest.”

“Arresting her won’t be possible,” Ciri said dryly. “She’s very dead.”

“She crossed the wrong woman,” he said in admiration. “Ah well, it’ll satisfy the old sod, no doubt.”

“Did you get that reward you’d hoped for?”

“Alas, no, and he was quite sour to be rescued by such reprobates as the von Everecs,” he said. “The look on his face when he thanked me. Another month as a figurine might have been preferable.”

“That’s his loss,” Ciri said.

“There’s no accounting for taste.” He shot her a grin over Umbra’s back. “You like us, blossom; that’s good enough for me.”

Her deal with O’Dimm forced its way to the forefront of her tired mind, and she swallowed back her guilt and returned his smile.

“You’re all right,” she allowed.

He laughed and feigned a wince. “So heartless for one so beautiful. I have it in your own words. You ‘rather like’ me.”

“So I do,” she agreed fondly.

A shadow fell across the stable’s open doorway, and Ciri looked over to see Olgierd at the entrance.

“Stable hand told the maid our guest was back,” he said, his voice warm. “You’ve returned in one piece. And successfully?”

The guilt bit her again as he came closer. *‘There’s a very particular fish I have my eye on.’* Damn O’Dimm and his plots—she never should have agreed.

“I got the manuscript,” she said, “though not without some difficulty.”

“So I see.” He stopped in front of her and raised his hand to gently pull the collar of her shirt to the side, frowning a bit at the bandages. “The sorceress or the vampire?”

“The vampire. A fleder,” she added. “I’m healing well; my employer gave me ointment to speed it up.”

“And you’re here and still standing, and your enemies aren’t,” he said. “Well done.”

Just as gently, he pulled her collar back into place and let go, and she held in a shiver as his hand slipped away.

“I’m sure you’ve a story to tell,” he continued, crossing over to the wall to grab another currycomb. “I look forward to hearing it. The maid’s drawn your bath if you’d like to head in. We’ll see to Umbra for you.”

“Thank you.” She stooped to pick up her rucksack and headed toward the door with a last smile for the brothers.

The inside of the inn was as busy and boisterous as ever, the space overflowing with laughing, drinking, gambling bandits. The couple from the first night were at the nearest table this time, and from the position of their hands Ciri had a very good idea of what was going on beneath it. Stefan looked up from a card game at her entrance and raised his tankard to her amiably.

“She returns,” he greeted her. “Welcome back.”

Ciri nodded in return and cast an eye over the tables. There were more coins in evidence today, more jewelry. Their raid had clearly been a successful one. She pushed away the knowledge of exactly what that meant.

“Maid’s lookin’ for you,” he added. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the stairs. “Not the jumpy one. Her sister. Came back from her honeymoon while we were in Velen.”

“Thanks,” she said, and she wended her way through the crowded room away from the reveling bandits.

Marta’s sister waited for her at the top of the stairs, her arms crossed protectively across her chest. Ciri spotted the resemblance at once in her blonde curls and deep brown eyes.

“You’re back in room twelve,” she said abruptly, uncrossing her arms to hold out the key. “The bath is waiting for you inside.”

She went back down the stairs before Ciri could thank her, her back stiff and her shoulders set. Ciri sighed and set off down the hall toward her room at the end. She let herself in and closed the door behind her, and she leaned against it with a soft sound of relief.

A large wooden tub took up most of the space between the foot of the bed and the far wall, half-full of clean, clear water, with a folded towel lying beside it. Ciri dropped her rucksack to the floor and began to disrobe, unbuckling her belts, removing her corset, and tugging off her boots. She carefully unwound the bandages from her shoulders and set them aside. Soap and hair wash came out of the depths of her pack, and she crossed to the tub to sink into the hot water with another deep sigh.

The past few days of accumulated road dirt floated to the surface of the water in a filmy gray layer as she scrubbed at her skin and washed her hair, then washed it again for good measure. She sat up a bit to keep her half-healed injuries out of the dirty water and settled against the back of the tub, her head lolling in relaxation.

She’d missed them both terribly, more than she thought she would. And if Vlodymir’s exuberant greeting was any indication, he’d missed her as well. It had felt—a small, traitorous part of her admitted—like a homecoming. Doubly so when Olgierd had appeared, at the warmth in his voice and the care they’d shown in tending to Umbra in her stead.

She was never going to stay; she had a life, a Path, *family* in the present. But that being, O’Dimm, had been right. She’d intended a soft farewell, one that left open the possibility of someday coming back to see them again, even just for an evening at the Alchemy.

And now she couldn’t even have that.

Ciri hauled herself from the cooling tub and wrapped the towel around her body, bending over to wring out her hair into the water. She rubbed herself dry and returned to her rucksack to find her ointment and fresh bandages as well as the cleanest change of clothes she had left. With corset and belts affixed again and her dagger at her waist, she pulled out the burned manuscript and headed for the door on slow, reluctant feet.

“Fiona!” Vlodimir called out as she entered the common area. He waved at her from across the room, where he sat with his brother apart from the others, a pair of tankards before them. Two plates covered in chicken bones and potato skins lay discarded by the end. “Over here.”

“You look a bit better,” Olgierd said as she sat beside his brother, her arm bumping his companionably. “And a sight for sore eyes, as well.”

“Is that the book?” Vlodimir asked eagerly. He whistled at the sight of the cover. “You’ve a tale for us, I see.”

“You could say that,” she said. She passed the book into Olgierd’s waiting hands and watched as he opened the cover with care. “I made good time to Tretogor, but then I didn’t have a clue where to start my search. I spent a few days just asking every likely person in taverns around the city about a sorcerer named Albrecht, and finally a man pointed me in the right direction.”

“And who was he?” Vlodimir asked.

“A former member of the Brotherhood of Sorcerers, a graduate of Ban Ard Academy,” she said. “Albrecht de Rycher. I broke into his townhouse—”

“Ha!”

“—and went through his study looking for the manuscript. But *of course*, once I found it, *he* found me—and so did Ilona and the fleder they had under their control.”

Olgierd looked up from the book. His eyes flickered across her freshly bandaged shoulders again before catching her gaze. Concern lurked in their depths. “How did you get out of that mess?”

“De Rycher said I couldn’t be allowed to leave, that I’d seen too much. He told Ilona to ‘deal with’ me.” Ciri shrugged and winced at the motion. “I caught her off-guard. I didn’t get so lucky with the other two. De Rycher set fire to the desk the book was on and ordered the fleder to attack me, and he left.”

The brothers both leaned closer at that, and Ciri leaned in as well, lowering her voice.

“The fleder came right at me—I barely had time to strike at its stomach before it got its claws in my shoulders. Somehow, I managed to pull free before it could tear into my throat, and I struck it again, deep in its neck. I expect I owe my life to the vampire oil I had on my blade.”

“And to your training, no doubt,” Vlodimir praised her. “Your witcher would be proud of you.”

“We feared for you,” Olgierd said quietly. “I’m pleased those fears were baseless.”

Slow warmth suffused her at their words. She smiled across the table at Olgierd and pressed her arm against Vlodimir’s before continuing her story.

“I managed to get the fire out before it damaged the manuscript too badly, but when I got back out to the street, I could hear de Rycher shouting that I’d broken in and killed his guest. I had no choice but to run, to flee Tretogor. Luckily, I wasn’t caught. I rode straight here—I didn’t even stop at an inn until last night out of caution.”

Olgierd let out a sharp laugh. “Fleeing from the guard on horseback, now there’s a familiar tale. But you returned to us safely, and with the book you sought, no less. Congratulations are in order.”

He passed the book back and gave her a nod of approval.

“So, what did I miss?” Ciri asked. “I see your raid went well.”

“Spoils and excitement, as I told you,” Vlodimir said. He nudged her playfully with his elbow. “You should have been there, muffin. Wind in our faces, hooves pounding beneath us, villagers shitting their pants at the sight.”

She snorted. “The last time I did something even close to that, I ended up wanted for hanging.”

“Perhaps it’s best you stay out of Geso a mite longer,” Olgierd suggested with wry humor.

“Believe me, I don’t intend to ever return there,” she said.

Vlodimir’s hand fell to her thigh and gave a brief squeeze before slipping away. “Wise of you. It would be a shame to lose such a lovely neck to a hangman’s noose.”

Ciri laughed and leaned against him tiredly. “I missed your ridiculous flirting.”

His arm settled carefully behind her shoulders, warm and heavy like a blanket, as laughter shook his chest. “You’ll sleep like the dead tonight.”

“Mm-hm.” She glanced at Olgierd. “I heard the van Jonnes weren’t very grateful to be rescued.”

“Nobility can’t buy honor,” he replied. “Had van Jonne not been in a right state, I expect Vlod might have demanded satisfaction from him. But what’s done is done.”

“We do have some good news,” Vlodimir added. “That Ofieri prick the Bilewitzes engaged Iris to—he’s gone missing. Wedding’s postponed indefinitely.”

Olgierd gave Ciri a hard, grimly pleased smile. “Can’t imagine where a foreigner of his stature might wander off to here in Redania, but I’ll not bemoan the loss if he fails to reappear.”

“And have Iris’ parents...” she trailed off hesitantly.

He shook his head. “Nay. Though not for lack of trying on my part.”

“You’ll win them over yet,” Vlodimir said. He grinned at Ciri. “Olgierd said he’s struck on a solution to our current woes. A woman at a tavern pointed him toward some helpful chap with the right connections.”

Ice water flooded her veins, and she bit back a warning. But still—

“That sounds too good to be true,” she ventured to say.

“And it may prove so,” Olgierd said. “But it seems the best option. The only option, at this point, if we’re honest.”

Vlodimir’s arm tightened around her shoulders just the slightest bit, but he didn’t disagree. Instead, he dropped his free hand to his belt purse and rummaged through it.

“We picked something up at the market for you the other day with a bit of the coin we took in from the raid. Saw them at a booth and thought of your eyes.”

“Vlodimir did,” Olgierd amended.

“Don’t pay him any heed, dewdrop,” Vlodimir said dismissively as he set a small leather pouch on the table before Ciri. “He was right there with me, sorting through baubles for the right gift. It’s from the both of us.”

A stone sank in her stomach even as she reached for it. She undid the knotted satin cords tying it closed and tipped the contents into her palm, and she stared speechlessly down at the green tourmaline earrings. Simple drops on gold wire, not at all like the flashy things she’d worn years ago, but the coincidence echoed, past, present, and future intertwining in the palm of her hand.

“Not gems fit for your beauty,” Vlodimir said, sounding almost embarrassed, “but give us a few days and Olgierd’s man will come through for us. You’ll have emeralds, if you like—”

“I can’t accept this,” she interrupted quietly.

Olgierd looked at her for a long, slow moment, then sat back. “Ah. Made up your mind, then?”

“I can’t—” Her voice failed her, and she averted her eyes as Vlodimir’s arm slowly slid off her shoulders. She took an unsteady breath and told them the half-truth she’d practiced on the road. “I can’t go back to this life, to banditry. The memories are too painful. I walked away from it for a reason. It’s not a part of my life I can relive.”

“Still judging us?” Vlodimir asked her.

She shook her head and reached for his hand impulsively. “No! *No*, Vlodimir. It’s not a judgment, it’s—”

“She was miserable that night we came back from Carsten,” Olgierd told Vlodimir. Understanding softened his expression. “And you’d not enjoy the raids, either, would you?”

“No,” she said simply.

Vlodimir’s hand closed around hers, and he sighed heavily. “Ah, skylark. It’s true, it’s not a life for everyone. You’d have been a marvel at it, but we shan’t try to talk you around if your heart’s set on leaving. Though promise to visit, won’t you?”

“I don’t know when it will be safe to,” she said, edging around a no. “De Rycher is a powerful sorcerer with far more connections than I have, and he knows what I look like. The safest thing I can do is leave Redania for a good long while.”

“You’ll be missed,” Olgierd said. Something softer and warmer than regret filled his eyes when he looked at her. “Keep the earrings. As a way to remember us.”

It took a second try before she could speak around the lump in her throat. “As if I could ever forget either of you.”

Vlodimir squeezed her hand and let go slowly, and he set his arm around the back of her shoulders again. “Give us one more day,” he coaxed. “We’ve nothing planned for tomorrow, and I hear Carsten is having some sort of party to celebrate their spring wheat harvest.”

“One more day,” she agreed. She leaned on Vlodimir again. “We’ll make it a good one.”

“Splendid.”

She laughed a little and dropped the earrings back into the pouch.

“What?” Vlodimir asked.

“You showed me the sights,” she reminded him. “Now you’ve bought me baubles.”

Instead of the expected laughter, that sly, sweet smile crossed his face. He raised her chin up with a finger, her lips only inches from his.

“If you wish to be tipped into bed as well, you need only say the word.”

He really did have beautiful eyes. Almost honey brown, with those little gold flecks.

It was with more than a bit of disappointment that she told him, “I’m afraid the only thing I want in bed tonight is sleep, and lots of it.”

He did laugh at that, and he dropped his finger and pulled back. “Fair enough. Though not before you eat something. You’ll not heal on an empty stomach.”

“Supper would be nice,” she said, stifling a yawn.

Olgierd turned in his seat to flag down Marta’s sister as she hurried through the room. “Some supper over here—our usual.”

She bustled over and grabbed the discarded dishes, her gaze flicking over Ciri as she did. “I’ll have it right out for you, sir.”

She disappeared back into the kitchen, and Olgierd turned to Ciri again.

“I’ll ask one of the women to lend you a change of clothes for tomorrow,” he said. “The innkeep’s lass can do your laundry while we’re off in Carsten for the day.”

“Lidia’s about your size, if not quite as delightfully tall,” Vlodimir suggested. The hand hanging at the end of the arm draped behind her shoulders playfully cupped the air in front of her chest. “A bit more generously endowed—*oof*.”

She pulled her elbow back from his ribs and glared up at him in annoyed amusement. “You’re awful.”

“And there it is,” he said, pulling her back in to lean on him again. “I missed that chiding Cintran accent. Be a dear, say it again and make up for all the days I had to go without hearing it.”

“Hmph.”

She rested her head on his solidly built shoulder and let herself drift into a light doze as the brothers spoke quietly. Every so often her pillow would jerk with Vlodimir’s laughter, and a broad hand would come up to stroke her hair back as she stirred into wakefulness.

“Rest, moonbeam,” he said softly. “Your supper’s not here yet.”

“Mm.”

Ciri didn’t know how much time had passed before he gently stroked her hair again and propped her upright. She blinked and yawned, closing her hands around the utensils he set in them.

“Eat up,” he encouraged her.

She dug into her chicken leg and baked potato methodically, barely tasting it as she chewed and swallowed each mouthful. After a minute she looked over at Vlodimir in tired confusion.

“Where did Olgierd go?”

“To ask Lidia to bring you clothes,” he said. “See?”

She followed his gesture across the room to where Olgierd stood by another table speaking to Lidia and another woman. As she watched, he turned and looked at her, then said something more. Lidia looked over as well, and she smirked as she caught Ciri’s eyes. She glanced up at Olgierd and nodded, then stood to leave.

Olgierd returned and settled back in the seat across from them. “She’ll bring a fresh shirt to your room before you turn in for the night. If you need anything else—”

“That should be plenty,” she said hastily. She dug into her potato again and shoved another forkful into her mouth.

His moustache twitched as a small, amused smile curled the corners of his mouth. “You are still our guest, and if there’s anything we can provide for you—”

“The pair of you, honestly,” Ciri muttered under Vlodimir’s laughter. “No, I don’t need underthings, thank you.”

Olgierd chuckled and reached for his tankard. “As you wish.”

She finished her supper quickly and hesitated over her empty plate, unsure how to leave. Reluctant to let them out of her sight now that she had them in it again. Olgierd settled it with a tilt of his head toward the stairs.

“Your bed’s calling you,” he said. “Go on. We’ll see you bright and early tomorrow.”

“We’ll make your last day with us a worthy one,” Vlodimir added.

Her heart twisted, guilt coloring the affection and robbing her of her happiness. She smiled at them both, terrified her culpability was written all over her face, knowing her feelings for them were.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” she said. She slipped out from under Vlodimir’s arm and collected the manuscript and the little pouch with the earrings. “Good night.”

The noise of the common area fell off behind her as she trudged her way up the stairs on tired legs. She made it halfway down the hall before one of the doors flew open and slammed against the wall, and she turned to see Lidia lean out with a white blouse dangling from her hand.

“Heard you need this,” she said, shaking the shirt at Ciri.

“Yes. Thank you.”

Ciri stopped and waited, another yawn escaping her as she did. Lidia strolled over and held the shirt just out of reach. She looked Ciri up and down scornfully.

“Weren’t worth their time after all, were you?”

“I told them so from the beginning,” Ciri said.

Lidia scoffed. “They courted you proper, they did. Any other woman would have joined up at the first outin’ they took you on. Ungrateful, that’s what you are. Loanin’ you a mount and pickin’ out trinkets at the market, and you’re turnin’ up your nose.”

“I *can*’t stay,” Ciri said. “I am grateful; they’ve been wonderful hosts. But I have work to do, places to be.”

“You done a number on them,” Lidia continued, as if Ciri hadn’t spoken. “I haven’t seen them so twisted around a wench since Olgierd met his lady.” She smirked at Ciri. “Vlodimir was choosy at our last party. He wouldn’t settle for just any lass to tumble. Had to have one with hair like yours. And Olgierd had a girl with green eyes on his knee all evenin’.”

A hot flush swept over Ciri and settled low in her stomach. She clenched her hands around her burdens and glared at Lidia. “You said Olgierd doesn’t fuck women on raids anymore.”

Lidia waved a hand at her dismissively. “On his knee, I said. Nowt wrong with that.” She gave Ciri a slow, mean smile. “Not just stars in your eyes for him now, is it?”

“That’s not any of your business,” Ciri said coldly.

“Our wild boars, sniffin’ at your heels like tame pigs,” Lidia taunted her. “No wonder, you a sow in farrow around them.”

Ciri’s face burned. She reached out and snatched the shirt dangling from her hand and strode past her down the hall to cackling laughter.

“You should still let him plough you,” Lidia called after her. “It’ll be a nice send off—scratch that itch of yours.”

The door slammed shut behind Ciri, and she knocked her head softly against the wood with a groan as the flush receded from her cheeks.

A woman with hair like hers. A girl with green eyes. A sick sort of flattery warred with dismay—was that all she was to them in the end? A chance to get their cocks wet and features that could be swapped onto any woman?

She shook her head sharply. Everything they’d done since she’d met them contradicted that. And they’d been so welcoming when she’d returned, so warm and thoughtful. Solicitous, even. It couldn’t be what Lidia said.

She dropped the manuscript and the shirt on the bedstand and set the little pouch on top, then set about getting ready for bed. Clothes hit the floor carelessly; her teeth got a halfhearted scrub with a linen cloth and tooth paste over the wash basin.

At last, she slid under the covers and buried her face in the pillow.

“Ugh.”

Ciri flopped back over to stare at the ceiling, images and phantom sensations running riot through her mind. A whiskered kiss against her cheek, damp with vodka. Green eyes laughing at her from the face of a woman perched on Olgierd’s knee. A strong arm, warm around her shoulders. Her hair, tossed over a stranger’s shoulders as Vlodimir fucked her.

She slipped her fingers between her legs and closed her eyes, her breath hitching at the touch. She rubbed softly, then with more pressure as the pleasure built. Her other hand gently played with her breast. She couldn’t tell whose broad hand she imagined in its place.

Her fingers sped up, rubbing desperately as she gasped quietly into the dark room. Her heart pounded in her ears. Pleasure peaked and broke over her, and she sagged back into the mattress, two different names on the tip of her tongue.

She caught her breath and stared back up at the ceiling. Her eyes prickled unexpectedly.

Damn them both. And damn Geralt for good measure. Feelings were never supposed to get involved.

“One more day,” she whispered.

And then she’d abandon them to the cold-eyed being who terrified even Geralt.

She’d find them again. The moment Yennefer solved the problem with the vampires in the present, she’d go find them, even if it was just to look in on them from a distance.

This wouldn’t be the end. She’d make sure of it.

A Kiss for Luck

Chapter Notes

Beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

Ciri lingered on the bottom step with uncharacteristic hesitation, just out of sight of the bustle of the common room. An odd shyness held her in its grasp, the memory of last night's conversation with Lidia and her response to it altogether too vivid in the morning's sharp light.

It was only fair, she reasoned, a bit petulantly, a bit guiltily. If they'd imagined her, then why shouldn't she have imagined them?

She tried to take that final step down and failed. Her feet were stone beneath her.

Once she was there, once they set eyes on each other—the last day would truly begin. As long as she stood here, dithering in the stairwell, that farewell could be put off indefinitely.

She took a steadying breath against the tight, sad knot in her chest and smoothed an invisible wrinkle from her borrowed shirt. For all Lidia's crassness the night before, she'd loaned her what had to be her nicest blouse, soft white linen decorated at the neck and wrists with tiny red embroidered flowers. As Vlodimir had jokingly pointed out, the bandit was better endowed than she was, and the gently gathered neckline dipped rather lower on Ciri's chest than it likely did on Lidia.

Just one step. It felt like stepping off a cliff.

As usual, Vlodimir spotted her first. His eyes lit up as he stood from the table, a broad smile overtaking his face.

"Fiona!" He crossed the room in a few swift strides and took her hand to spin her playfully around beneath his outstretched arm. "Aren't you a vision? All the village girls in Carsten will seem drab as sparrows next to you."

She laughed and pulled away with a squeeze to his hand. "And how will the men fare with you two to compete with?"

He winked and set his hand on the small of her back to steer her toward their table. "So long as you're the one looking at us, snowberry, I couldn't care less how they fare."

"Redanian fashion suits you," Olgierd greeted her from behind his cup of coffee. He smiled as his eyes wandered from her face to her ears. "As do those earrings. The green complements your eyes well."

He drained his cup and got to his feet, handing her a small package wrapped in waxed cloth. “You’ll have to break your fast on horseback, I fear. We wouldn’t want to miss anything by arriving late.”

“Top-notch rustic peasant diversions,” Vlodimir added. “Only the best for you.”

“If you stayed a few days longer, the Belleteyn festivals in the area would be unmatched,” Olgierd said. “Oxenfurt turns wild for the night; there’s no place better.”

Ciri shook her head. “I can’t.” She heard the regret in her voice clear as a bell.

“Had to be asked,” he said, almost gently. “Come. We’ll want to get there before it’s midday.”

She fell in between the brothers as they made their way past the tables toward the door. Quite by accident, her eyes met Lidia’s, and she jerked her gaze away at her low, derisive snort of laughter.

“Mind sharing what that’s about?” Olgierd asked once the inn’s door had shut behind them.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Ciri dismissed. “She warned me before not to waste your time, and she had words for me last night about not heeding her.”

He grunted softly in disagreement. “Hardly a waste of our time. You only promised us consideration, and we knew it well. She, on the other hand, promised to make you welcome. I’ll have a word or two with her later.”

“Put it from your mind,” Vlodimir said. “You’ve been a delightful guest. We haven’t had such fun in months.”

Ciri unwrapped her breakfast and started to chew at the bread roll with the cheese and ham stuffed between the halves as they entered the stables. She ate quickly, hungrily, wolfing it down in large bites. It was gone by the time she reached Umbra’s stall.

A large hand caught the stall door as she stepped in, and she looked over her shoulder to see Olgierd standing behind her.

“That wasn’t all, was it?”

She glanced away and stared intently at Umbra’s mane. “It wasn’t anything worth speaking of.”

“Fiona.” His voice was firm. “If she’s offended you—”

“She spoke of your party,” Ciri interrupted. “The one you had after your raid. She said you... you had a woman with green eyes on your knee. And that Vlodimir fucked a woman with hair like mine.”

Olgierd snorted. “Couldn’t rightly tell you what color the girl’s eyes were. My attention was on the dice game and my drink.”

“So she was just, what, ornamentation?” Ciri asked, raising her eyebrows at him skeptically.

“A man must play his part,” he said with a shrug. “It keeps the lads happy, at the least. And I’d not dishonor Iris by doing more.”

She scoffed at him. “Would Iris agree with the line you’ve drawn?”

“Perhaps not,” he allowed, “though I keep my hands where I should and don’t make advances where I oughtn’t.” He shook his head and leaned on the doorway. “As for my brother... do you imagine there are many peasant women in Velen with hair like yours?”

Ciri reflexively touched the loose strands hanging free by her face. “I—well, no.”

“He had his fun with a fair enough blonde lass, though it’s not at all as Lidia told you.” He caught her eyes again and held them, his face sincere. “Will you trust that?”

She hesitated, then nodded firmly. “I do trust you. Both of you.”

He gave her a faint smile and rapped his knuckles on the stall door. “Good. Come. We’ll help you with Umbra’s tack. There’s no time to waste.”

Vlodimir awaited them by the wall of tack. Falka already stood saddled and bridled at his side. He reached out for the lead to Umbra’s halter and slipped it from her head, motioning Ciri to lean against the wall as she had yesterday.

“At your service,” he said with another wink.

The brothers efficiently tacked up Umbra and Barghest and mounted their horses. Ciri gripped Umbra’s saddle and mane, bracing for the pull on her shoulders, and swung up and over.

“All right?” Vlodimir asked as Ciri shifted her hold on the reins.

“Never better,” she said, rolling out her shoulders. “Let’s be off.”

“Onward,” he declared grandly. “To drinks, dancing, and the entertainment of the local peasantry.”

“In that order, of course,” she said, laughing, as they rode out of the stable and into the yard.

He grinned at her. “If the evening doesn’t end in a dance with you, I’ll consider the day wasted, muffin.”

“I’m a fair dancer, though I don’t know any Redanian dances,” she told him. “You’ll have to teach me.”

“As graceful as you are with a sword in your hand, I don’t imagine you’ll have any trouble learning the steps,” he said.

They left the yard and headed left on the packed dirt road, the morning sun warm on their heads and flowers blooming fragrant in the bushes all around them. Ciri relaxed in her saddle with a small smile.

If this had to be her last day, it was off to a fine start.

An air of festivity was already swirling through Carsten as they rode in. Colorful garlands hung between the houses, and bright bouquets decorated every flat surface. The brothers received a few odd, slightly wary looks from some of the men, but Vlodimir just nodded affably back and leaned over to speak to Ciri in an undertone.

“We may have a bit of a reputation as troublemakers in the area,” he said in amusement, as if admitting a great secret.

“How shocking,” Ciri quipped.

Olgierd leaned in on her other side, dry humor in his voice. “They’ve naught to fear save Vlodimir overindulging and starting a brawl over a woman. They’re *Redanian* peasants, after all.”

“Slander,” Vlodimir protested. “I’d not start a brawl over a common wench when I have the company of such a gem as Fiona.”

Ciri laughed and nudged Umbra forward toward the hitching post by the big barn festooned with flowers and garlands. “Are you certain? Some of these women might enjoy a big, strapping man fighting for them.”

“I’ll swear it on whatever gods you ask me to.” He gave her a cheeky smile. “Though if you want me to start a brawl for you, tulip—”

She swung down from Umbra’s saddle, grinning back. “We’ll keep it in reserve in case things get dull.”

“Ha!”

They hitched their horses and set off into the village, Ciri bracketed on either side by the brothers. The back of Vlodimir’s hand brushed hers as they walked, and she suppressed the urge to reach for it.

A stout matron with an armful of flower necklaces stepped out in their path, and she thrust one out at Ciri. “Can’t wander around Carsten without one, dearie. Nor you two,” she added with a gimlet look at Olgierd and Vlodimir.

“Pretty posies,” Vlodimir said, dropping the flower necklace around his head. “What manner of peasant custom is this?”

“Should a girl find you charming or handsome, she may give you hers,” the woman told them. “And if you set your eye on a comely lass, you might offer her your garland, though she may always refuse. Gives unmarried folk someone to jump the fires with at Belleteyn.”

He took his off with alacrity and looped it around Ciri's neck before she could settle her own there. "You're the only one here for me, dewdrop."

She set her garland around her neck and pressed a quick, impulsive kiss to his cheek. "I'll keep a hold of mine," she teased him. "In case a better offer comes along."

He staggered and clutched his heart. "You've a vicious streak."

"Here." Olgierd's garland fell around her head to settle on the other two. "That should keep the womenfolk from trying their luck with me."

That familiar sinking sensation didn't ache quite so badly this time, not when she knew to expect it. And not with Vlodimir standing beside her, his eyes warm.

"Clod," Vlodimir muttered under his breath. He held out his elbow to Ciri. "Shall we?"

She tucked her hand into the crook and pressed her upper arm against his. "Lead on."

"Welcome, Fiona, to Carsten," he said, leading her into the small village. "It hardly looks like much, but this quaint little spot provides the flour for the breads and pastries that grace Redania's finest tables. Twice a year they throw a party like this, once for each wheat harvest. I've never been to one before, but I imagine it must be good if they keep doing it, eh?"

"Believe I've spotted the refreshments table," Olgierd said. He pointed ahead of them to a long table by one of the homes, overlaid with platters of meat, trays of baked goods, and dozens of bottles of alcohol.

Vlodimir's eyes lit up. "Well, well! I didn't think they could put on such a spread. We'll have to help ourselves later. Though it's never too early to indulge in a glass—"

Ciri tugged him onward. "Activities first, drinks after."

"Right you are, dumpling," he agreed with a laugh.

She stepped aside quickly to dodge a giggling child as they raced by, another one in hot pursuit. Faint sounds of music started, the rough scrape and droning warble of fiddlers and flautists warming up their instruments. The whole village seemed to have turned out—no, even people from surrounding villages had to be here.

They wandered aimlessly for a few minutes, slowly making their way out of the village and toward the newly bare wheat fields. Everywhere they went, bustle and laughter surrounded them.

Vlodimir exclaimed and pulled his elbow free only to grab Ciri's hand and drag her along. "That looks like cracking good fun!"

Ciri looked ahead to see what he meant. A dozen or so men and a few women stood clustered together at the edge of one of the wheat fields, a large bucket at their feet. In the distance, set at staggered intervals, painted wooden targets sat, ranging from five to what had to be a hundred yards away. As she watched, a stocky man grabbed something from the bucket,

wound his arm back, and loosed. His missile soared, sank, and landed just past the twenty-five-yard target. The men around him gave him hearty slaps on the back.

“Is that all there is to it?” Vlodimir asked as they approached. “Whoever throws the ball the farthest wins?”

The men and women turned to respond, and raised eyebrows greeted them.

“Never seen men *share* a lass before,” the man who’d last thrown said, eyeing Ciri’s flower necklaces.

Ciri’s face went hot, and Vlodimir took an angry step forward.

“Mind your tongue, churl. You speak of a decent woman.”

“Forgive the confusion, sir,” the man said hastily. “Nobles’ ways are beyond us. It’s as you say, of course.”

“The game, good folk,” Olgierd interrupted. “Is it as simple as it looks?”

“Aye, ‘tis quite simple,” a different man said. He held a slate and a piece of chalk in his hard, callused hands and wore small spectacles balanced on his reddened nose. “You take a ball from the bucket and throw as far as you can. Extra points if’n you can hit a target square on. I’ll mark down your name and the distance, and the winner will get a prize at the end of the festival.”

“Right then, hand it over,” Vlodimir ordered him. “We’ll show you how it’s done.”

“Now, now, masters, you’ll have to wait your turn,” the man said. “There’s two folks ahead of youse.”

“Bah—very well.”

Vlodimir stepped back to stand by Ciri and Olgierd, and he draped his arm around her shoulders, still mindful of her injuries. “Will you join in, dewdrop?”

She shook her head and let herself lean on him. “I think it might pull the wounds open again if I did. You’ll have to settle for me cheering you on.”

“Then we daren’t lose,” he said. “That prize is as good as yours.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

She glanced to her side to see Olgierd watching them with an inscrutable look in his eyes. When he saw he had her attention, he gave her a small smile and looked away.

A tall, wiry woman grabbed a ball from the bucket and craned her arm back, took a short hop, and hurled it forward. The ball sailed through the air and landed several yards shy of the last villager’s try.

“And that’s eighteen yards for Sara,” the man with the slate and chalk said, peering down the field. “Next, Jan.”

Jan proved less athletic than either of the two that threw before him, his ball landing a paltry nine yards away. The round of hearty backslaps had an air of consolation this time.

“And now you, sirs,” the man said, tipping his head to Vlodimir and Olgierd.

Olgierd gestured for Vlodimir to go first, and Vlodimir looked at Ciri with that smile that made her heart flutter. “A kiss for luck?”

She rolled her eyes, but she leaned in and pressed her lips to his, aiming for a swift peck. His hand came up to cradle the back of her skull, his lips parting against hers, and he deepened it, slowed it, his arm still close around her shoulders, holding her to him. Her hand drifted up to rest against his firm chest.

His lips were softer than she’d thought they’d be. Warmth tingled down her spine to pool low in her belly, and she swayed forward. A small sound escaped her.

Someone cleared their throat. He pulled back and met her eyes, a faint flush coloring his cheeks.

“Well now.” His voice was rough. “That’s enough luck to conquer a kingdom, moondrop.”

“Then you’d better get to conquering.”

He laughed and dropped another short kiss on her lips before letting her go and striding off to the bucket. She swallowed dryly, crossing her arms, and shivered as a firm shoulder brushed hers.

“He’s a good man, my brother,” Olgierd said, his voice low. “Loyal. A big heart.”

She glanced away from Vlodimir for a moment to raise an eyebrow at him. “You and Vlodimir just can’t help pushing me at each other, can you?”

He let out a huff of laughter. “Told you before, we’ve an eye for quality. You can’t blame us for being reluctant to see you leave.”

Over by the bucket, Vlodimir tossed the ball up in the air experimentally a few times, stretching his arms back and forth.

“Is that what this is?” she asked. Regret and something close to longing dug at her. “A last attempt to keep me here?”

“Mm. You’ve naught to fear; we’ll not stand in your way. But we’d sooner see you stay and never ride with us than see you leave and not return.”

Vlodimir wound up for his throw with a swift grin at Ciri and Olgierd. He loosed the ball with a “Ha!” that flew across the shorn wheat field along with it, racing high and long to finally slow and collide with the sixty-five yard target.

He spun around and poked the man officiating in the chest, grinning broadly. “Vlodimir von Everec. You’ll want to get the spelling right for when you deliver the prize later.”

“We’ve only just started,” another man protested.

“And I’ve clearly won,” Vlodimir countered. “There’s no shame in being bested by your better, man. It’s the natural state of things.”

The man reddened and took a step forward. “Look, you—”

“Apologies, sir,” Jan interrupted, grabbing his friend by the arm. “Sun’s gettin’ to Oleg. Time he had somethin’ to drink and a sit down. Come on, Oleg.”

Jan dragged his angrily muttering friend back toward the village. Vlodimir nodded in satisfaction and returned to Ciri’s side with a small bounce in his step.

“You should wish me luck more often,” he said, nudging her side with his elbow. He looked past her to his brother. “Planning on taking your turn?”

“May as well,” Olgierd said. He raised his eyebrows at Ciri, an almost playful gleam in his eyes. “And what sort of luck will you give me?”

She laughed softly and raised her hand to her lips to blow him a kiss. He made a fist in the air and pretended to tuck it away in his shirt, his moustache twitching with his smile.

As he strode off to collect his ball for the toss, Vlodimir leaned in to speak in her ear.

“I’ve my doubts that Iris’ father will let him press his suit again. And he does have an interest in you.”

“You’re each as bad as the other,” Ciri said in exasperation. “And painfully transparent.” She shot him a mild glare. “Don’t go kissing me if you intend to keep pushing me at your brother.”

“If I recall correctly, you’re the one who kissed me, petal,” he murmured. “But fair enough. As I said before, I’ll keep my lips to myself—unless you change your mind.”

Over by the bucket, Olgierd made the same experimental toss of the ball that Vlodimir had and launched it forcefully forward. It hurtled through the air and collided with a faint, dull thud against the sixty-five-yard target. Vlodimir made a soft sound of approval at her side.

“Not throwing the game this time. Whatever trinket these yokels have as a prize is yours, snapdragon.”

The man with the slate and chalk was already carefully writing by the time Olgierd turned from the field.

“Well now,” he said. He coughed into his fist. “The day is long, masters, and there are many yet to take their turn. But well thrown. Well thrown.”

“You announce it in the evening?” Olgierd asked him. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, “You’ll find us on the dance floor.”

He rejoined Ciri and Vlodimir and jerked his chin at the village just up the small hill. “Seems we’ve exhausted their goodwill here. Shall we find another diversion?”

Vlodimir slapped him on the back as they headed toward Carsten again. “And now for the mead.”

The day passed in a blur of laughter, food, and flirtation. Ciri won a game of horseshoe and came away with a length of blue ribbon that Vlodimir tied around her bun. They indulged in a pastry tasting, all three of them voting a gooey sweet roll made by a gray-haired woman with sturdy baker’s arms the best of the bunch. They sat back and laughed as a dozen drunken men took turns on the village plough horse to clumsily joust at a haystack.

And all around them, men and women flirted and made eyes with each other, flower garlands slipping off one neck and onto another.

The earlier sounds of musicians tuning their instruments had long since turned to lively, vibrant music, and as the sky began to turn a soft pink at the horizon, Vlodimir grabbed Ciri’s hand and pulled her up from the bench where she sat.

“You hear that, rock-rose?” he asked. “Music like that isn’t the sort you sit and nod to like an old woman. Come, I’ll teach you the steps.”

She squeezed his hand and hurried along, the beat putting a spring in her step. Behind them, Olgierd ambled in their wake.

Inside, the barn was lit by cheerful yellow lanterns and strewn with flowers. The scent of fresh hay rose from the floor as feet gleefully tromped over it in time with the music. At the far end, the musicians played with vigor.

“You’re a fighter; you know how to mirror an opponent,” Vlodimir said. “Eyes on mine—don’t watch my feet. And off we go!”

With those paltry instructions, he swept her, laughing and protesting, into the crowd.

“This isn’t teaching me!”

“Doing is the best way to learn!” he insisted, pulling her into his chest with a gentle tug. He gave her a light push to spin her back out. “With me, now.”

Her feet faltered a bit at first, her hands a half-second too slow on the claps, but she picked it up faster than she thought. Around and around they went, skipping, spinning, clapping, her eyes locked on those honey brown irises smiling back at her.

The music slowed and stopped, and they came to a halt in the center of the barn, one of Ciri’s hands in his and the other on his shoulder. He gave her waist a gentle squeeze as the music started back up.

“Another dance?”

She tugged him into motion in response.

He whirled her around the floor, one song after another. His grace kept her missteps from appearing clumsy, and not once did he do anything but laugh good-naturedly and spin her onward. Her cheeks hurt from how widely, how hard, she was smiling. Out the barn’s open doors, the pink sky turned a soft, inky black.

The music slowed again, and Vlodimir gave Ciri a flourishing twirl away from him, releasing her hand as he did. She stumbled a step and collided into a hard chest. Her nose bumped Olgierd’s cheek as his hands came up to steady her hips.

“Any dances left for me?” he asked. “Or has my brother spent your energy for the night?”

Ciri took a reluctant step back. “I can spare you a dance.” She glanced over her shoulder at Vlodimir, and he gave her a nod and turned to leave the dance floor.

“One thing.” He took her hand in his and slipped something over it to encircle her wrist. “Man from the wheat field came and found me. The prize was a bauble meant for a man’s sweetheart. As Vlod and I were tied, and we came with you, it’s yours.”

She examined it in the soft light of the barn, turning her wrist back and forth to admire the gleam on the brightly polished wood and gray-blue stone bead bracelet. It was a simple thing, the simplest piece of jewelry she’d ever worn, but it had a charm to it, and it had clearly been made by skilled hands.

“Vlodimir will regret he wasn’t the one to give it to you,” he added as the music started again, slow and sweet.

“You two just can’t help yourselves,” she sighed.

He led her through the steps of a new dance, their hands meeting and parting as they circled each other. A shiver went through her at the warm touch of his callused palm against hers, again and again. From the look in his eyes, she wasn’t the only one affected.

“Fiona,” he started, then glanced away sharply as a drunken voice cut through the music.

“—that snob from Oxenfurt, Bilewitz. Tipped me good at the races yesterday. Wouldn’t stop tellin’ folk about his daughter.”

Olgierd broke away from Ciri and strode off the dance floor, leaving her standing alone. With barely a second’s thought, she chased after him. She ducked around the still dancing couples to catch up with him by the wall of the barn. The drunk shrank against the wall, staring up at Olgierd as he fisted a hand in his tunic.

“Iris Bilewitz,” Olgierd demanded. He gave the man a hard shake. “What did her father say?”

“I—I don’t know! I’m just a stable hand!” the man protested.

“Think harder!”

“He—he was lookin’ for suitors,” he said. “Wanted to get her married off right quick after that prince disappeared. Somethin’ about rumors of ill luck.”

Olgierd cursed and let the man go with a shove. Ciri hurried after him as he ploughed through the cheerful crowd, striding toward the open doors of the barn.

Vlodimir intercepted him with a frown. “Something amiss?”

“Bloody Bilewitz,” Olgierd snapped. He raked an unsteady hand through his hair and glanced between his brother and Ciri. “You’ll have to head back to the inn without me.”

“And where are you off to, then?” Vlodimir asked.

“Yantra,” Olgierd said tersely.

“Hold on.” Vlodimir caught Olgierd’s arm. “What’s in Yantra?”

“That”—Olgierd faltered—“that man who can help us get our fortune back.”

“We’ll go with you,” Vlodimir insisted.

“No.” Olgierd pulled his arm free and set his hand on Vlodimir’s shoulder. “See Fiona back to the inn. I’ll take care of this myself.”

Outside the cheerfully lit barn, a light drizzle fell from the night sky. Ciri shivered as the cold droplets slowly started to dampen her hair and clothes. Vlodimir wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in against his warm side while they walked back toward the hitching post.

“I’ll see you tonight?” he asked Olgierd once they’d mounted up.

Olgierd gave him a short, distracted nod. “I’ll return before morning.”

He pressed his knees into Barghest’s sides and rode off out the other side of the village. Vlodimir looked to Ciri, his face shadowed in the dim light.

“Back to the inn, moonbeam? Or would you like to stay and dance a bit longer?”

Ciri mustered up a smile for him. The tight, sad knot from this morning sat hard and heavy in her chest again.

“Back to the inn, I think.”

He reached between their horses for her hand and lifted it to his lips. “Then to the inn we go.”

They turned the horses back toward Oxenfurt at a lazy walk, the drizzle chilling them through. For once, Vlodimir didn’t have anything to say. But that was all right. Ciri wasn’t sure she had an answer.

We Can Have the Night

Chapter Notes

Beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

The door blew shut behind Ciri and Vlodimir as they entered the Black Mare, thoroughly damp and chilled through. A scattered handful of bandits still occupied the common area at the late hour, and one raised a lazy hand to wave to them before returning to his gwent game.

“Well, sugarplum?” Vlodimir said. He rubbed his hands together briskly. “The cook may still be awake. A cup of hot cider would warm us up.”

“We’ll warm up faster if we get into dry clothes.” Ciri glanced at the entrance to the kitchen. It was dark and still within, no sign of the inn’s staff. “And it looks like we’re out of luck for that cider, anyway.”

“Shame, that. I’d have liked to have kept the day going just a bit longer.”

“So would I,” she admitted softly.

Vlodimir gave her an oddly conflicted look, and for a moment Ciri thought he was about to say something else. He smiled and nodded toward the stairs instead. “Shall we go up, then?”

They headed across the room and up the stairs together in silence. Faint sounds of rustling and murmuring could be heard behind the closed doors they passed as they made their way to the end of the hall. Vlodimir came to a reluctant halt outside his door and turned to Ciri.

“I suppose I’ll see you in the morning,” he said.

She swallowed against a tight throat and nodded. “Of course.”

“Pleasant dreams, Fiona.”

“Good night.”

Ciri hesitated another second, but when he didn’t say anything further, she turned to go to her own room one door down.

She made it one step before he caught her hand.

“You don’t have to go,” he said quickly.

“Vlodimir—”

“This man Olgierd’s meeting—it’s a long shot; we all know it. Bilewitz will have Iris married off before my brother can blink. And he needs a good woman in his life.”

Ciri laughed, small and sad, as she let him tug her back. His hands settled on her hips, his thumbs rubbing slow, small circles against her hipbones.

“The two of you, honestly,” she sighed.

“We’re not helpless,” he said. “We can take care of that sorcerer you crossed. And then think of it, petal. A few good raids and we’d have enough to buy a little patch of land in Brunwich, right on the lake. We could build a cottage there. You could still do your mercenary work, if you like. Olgierd would get his head out of his arse about trying to bring back what we lost and settle down with the woman who’s made him happier than I’ve seen him since the manor was taken from us.”

Ciri tried to interrupt, and he rushed on.

“And when we’re not on raids, and you aren’t working, think of the adventures you could have. Free to wander the Continent, see new cities, meet new people. Fill that little cottage with mementos of all the places you’ve been.” He gave her a small smile. “I’d be over for supper so often you’d get sick of seeing me.”

She blinked hard against the sudden stinging in her eyes. “Damn you.”

“Or.” He paused, his thumbs stilling as well. “Or you could choose me.”

Ciri’s breath caught in her throat.

“I know I’m not the brother you want,” he said quietly, “but I’d be good to you. We’ve had fun, haven’t we, snowberry? You and I? That could be our little cottage. We’d go swimming every day, have horse races whenever the mood struck us. I can’t promise I’d be faithful; I don’t know that I have that in me. But you’d have my heart.”

She dashed the back of her hand across her eyes and leaned into him. His thumbs slowly started rubbing their circles again.

“Tell me about the woman you slept with at your party,” she said instead of answering.

“What of her, dove?”

“Lidia said she looked like me, that you were choosy. Olgierd said it wasn’t like that.”

She felt more than heard his chuckle, just a slight jerk of his chest. “Choosy? If you call turning down the first lass looking for a tumble because she was too soused to walk straight choosy. And she was blonde, if that’s what you mean, but she certainly didn’t look like you. Didn’t hold a candle to your beauty. I wasn’t looking to replace you.” His voice went low and intimate. “You’re irreplaceable.”

Her hands crept up to rest on his hard waist, and she dropped her head to rest on his shoulder. “Damn you,” she whispered again.

“I’d be a bloody fool if I didn’t ask you to stay. A man’s lucky if he meets a woman like you once in his lifetime.”

“I can’t stay. What you’re describing—if I could, Vlodimir, believe me, I’d stay. I’d stay for that.”

The rational part of her mind whispered that she’d known them all of three weeks, spent less than a week of that in their company. And she knew he had to be exaggerating, grasping at straws in a last attempt to make her stay. But they were deep in her heart now.

“For Olgierd,” he said. There was no rancor in his voice, only muted acceptance.

A soft, wet laugh escaped her. “You honestly believe I could choose?”

She straightened and reached for the garlands around her neck. The bright petals were limp from the hours spent in the drizzling rain. With careful hands, she lifted the topmost one and looped it around Vlodimir’s head to rest against his chest.

“I can’t stay,” she repeated, “but we can have the night.”

“Well.” He let go of her hip to set a broad palm gently against her cheek. His eyes, so soft in the dim light, slowly heated as he smiled. “I suppose we’ll have to make the most of it.”

He pulled her to him as he captured her lips with his, his free hand skimming up her back and then down again to settle on her ass. The flowers crumpled between them without a moment’s concern. Ciri wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back eagerly, pressing closer, all her attention on her lips and tongue and that tingling spot on her cheek where his hand rested.

Her back collided with the wall. A gasp flew from her as Vlodimir’s lips traveled down to her jaw, then her neck, one hard thigh between her legs. His hand slid from her cheek to cup her breast, softly stroking across her nipple through the fabric.

“How would you like it, firefly?” he murmured against her skin. He rocked his leg forward, and she gasped again. “Right here, where anyone could come up and find us?”

“You. Are. *Awful*,” she half-protested, her laugh fading off into a pleased moan. “My room.”

His hand left her ass to fish around blindly in her belt pouch for her room key as he pressed more hot kisses into the side of her neck. “Hm. Found it.”

He pulled her from the wall, and in one swift move, he hefted her into his arms, her legs straddling his waist. He grinned up at her cheekily.

“I rather like this. I could keep you here, admire the view from this angle.”

She laughed and kissed him again. “Gather under my limbs to admire my beauty?”

“And to think you questioned my preferences,” he teased her.

“I still have my suspicions about Falka—*ohh...*”

He let out a quiet, pleased chuckle and strode the rest of the way down the hall with her in his arms. They reached the door, still trading kisses, and he pressed her back against it and freed his hand to unlock it, holding her up with just the one arm. She spared a distracted, admiring thought for his strength, only to have it chased away by another kiss. The door swung open behind her, and his free hand gripped her ass again.

She winced as the door slammed shut at his kick. He snickered into her neck, kissing her just below her ear.

“I’d bet good coin that some of the lads were already listening,” he said. He softly nibbled on her jaw and kissed the light scrape of teeth away as she shivered. “May as well give them something to eavesdrop on. How loud do you get, dewdrop?”

“Depends how good you are.” She kissed the side of his head affectionately, giving his waist a squeeze with her legs. “Let me down.”

“All the better to get my hands on the rest of you.”

His hands slipped from her ass to her hips, and she dropped to her feet. She kissed him breathlessly as her hands fell to his belts. Callused fingers skimmed beneath her borrowed shirt to trail up her stomach and over her breasts.

“Soft as silk,” he murmured against her lips as he eased her shirt over her head. The garlands went with it. “I could spend hours touching you.”

His first belt hit the floor with a clatter. She gasped, her fingers fumbling, and he chuckled and stroked his thumb across her nipple through her bra again. He kissed the sound right out of her mouth, his devilish hands leaving her clumsy and lightheaded.

The second belt came free just as he figured out her bra. They fell to their feet at the same time, and he took a step back to give her a hot look. His eyes lingered on her breasts cupped in his hands.

“A perfect handful.” He gave them a soft caress and let go to unwrap the sash falling from his waist. “Melitele forgive me, but I’ve found a new goddess.”

Ciri bent to pull off her boots as he hastily shed his robe and shirt. Trousers followed, then underwear. He flashed her another look and swore beneath his breath, jerking off his boots and yanking down his trousers.

“Bloody hell, woman, you’ll kill me.”

He cut off her laugh with a hot kiss. She pressed in close to explore his firm sides and the sturdy planes of his back. His hard cock nudged between them.

“But what a death,” he added when he broke away.

Ciri shrieked with laughter as he scooped her up again and tossed her on the bed behind them. She barely had a moment before he fell on top of her, hard and heavy, his lips on hers once more. A strong hand stroked up her side to fondle her breast. She reached for him blindly, eager to touch, to feel.

His kisses slid down to her jaw, her neck, her collarbone, his hands never ceasing their caresses. Her knees fell apart at a gentle touch.

“And what is a goddess without a suppliant?” he asked her chest. He kissed her nipple and glanced up at her playfully. “You should be worshipped as you deserve. And I believe—”

He kissed her sternum.

“—the altar—”

He kissed her stomach.

“—is right here.”

A strangled gasp escaped Ciri. Maddening, teasing pleasure engulfed her at each flick of his tongue against her clit and between her lips. She dug her fingers into the blanket and whimpered, rocking her hips into his face. The vibration of his chuckle between her legs made her sob.

Thick, dexterous fingers slid inside her. A moan tore from her as they fucked her, his tongue still licking. She cried out at the lightest scrape of teeth against her clit. The shock dissolved into dizzying ecstasy as he closed his lips around it and sucked. She shrieked as she came, her back arching, hands cramped tight in the bedding.

He kissed her inner thigh and sat up slowly while she trembled and took large, shuddering breaths. His lips and chin glistened in the dim light.

His fingers still languidly stroked in and out, sending shivers of oversensitive pleasure through her. “I think you could come again, couldn’t you, lovely?”

“Vlodimir,” she whined. She let go of the bedding and propped herself up on her elbows to glare at him. “You’re—”

He snorted with laughter and kissed her knee. A crook of his fingers sent her head falling back against the pillow with another moan.

“There we go,” he murmured. “Let’s see you undone.”

She squirmed and sobbed against his rocking fingers, his thumb rubbing across the hood of her sensitive clit as he watched with heated eyes. It was too much, too good, more than she could take—

Another orgasm broke over her and she came with a whimper, her legs shaking.

“Beautiful,” he praised her. He kissed her knee again.

She whined under her breath as he slid his fingers from her, leaving her aching and empty. He laughed softly and ran his hands back up her sides to toy with her breasts.

“A goddess worthy of worship,” he said, giving her nipple a playful tweak with his thumb. “Order me, beauty. What do you want?”

“Fuck me,” she demanded. “Now.”

His grin gleamed at her in the darkened room, and his hands trailed back down to grip her thighs. “With pleasure, moonbeam.”

Deft fingers returned to her lips to part them. She swallowed a gasp at the slow, thick slide of his cock into her cunt, the first gentle rock of his hips against hers.

“I said fuck me,” she said breathlessly.

“In good time.”

He hefted her thighs higher around his waist and dropped forward to brace himself above her, his lips returning to her jaw as his free hand cupped her breast. She reached for him hungrily, mapping his skin with her fingers.

Each slow, even thrust rocked her back against the pillow and pushed her a little closer to insanity. If ever there was such a thing as torture through pleasure, this was it. A pinch to her nipple sent a shock zinging down to her clit.

“Vlodimir, *please*.”

She clutched his back and ground down on his cock, eager, breathless, half-mad with it.

His hips snapped forward, driving his cock into her and knocking a cry from her lungs. She moaned and rocked her hips up. Her fingers dug furrows into the meaty muscles in his back.

Pleasure drowned out linear thought. She was reduced to sensation: hot kisses on her neck. A clever hand on her breast. A cock, fucking hard and fast between her legs.

The mouth on her neck nibbled and sucked a soft kiss there. The hand squeezed her breast gently, rolling her nipple between its fingers.

Vlodimir’s rhythm faltered, and he swore and dropped his hand from her breast to her clit as his thrusts sped up.

“Come on, beauty,” he muttered against her jaw. “One more.”

Her orgasm tore through her, almost too intense for pleasure. She clutched his back and cried out into the room. His thrusts grew wilder, more desperate, his breath coming in pants on her neck. Then, with a low groan, he stiffened and collapsed on top of her.

Ciri stroked his back with an unsteady hand, wincing as she found the tiny grooves where her nails had dug in. He took a shuddering breath and raised himself back up on his forearms to

gently roll off her.

“On second thought.” He dropped a kiss on her temple and ran his fingers through the hair that had come loose. “For sex like that, I’d be the picture of fidelity if you asked it of me.”

Regret cut through her hazy glow like a knife, and she swallowed hard and leaned in to press her forehead to his. “I know.”

Vladimir sighed and kissed her, just a soft, simple touch of his lips to hers. “I’ll be right back.”

She watched as he stood from the bed and slowly walked across the room to the washbasin to pick up the cloth beside it and dip it in the water. He passed it across his mouth and chin, giving her a sidelong glance full of amusement as he did, and dunked it back in the water.

“While you’re up,” she said, “there’s a bottle in the front right pocket of my pack. Could you grab that for me?”

He looked over his shoulder at her curiously but didn’t ask any questions. Her gaze lingered on his nude body as he found her rucksack and bent to retrieve her contraceptive. When he stood, his eyes caught hers, and he grinned.

“Enjoying the scenery, rosebud?”

“Mm-hm.” She stretched out a hand to beckon him back. “Come here.”

The mattress dipped as Vladimir settled at her side again and pulled her into his arms. He handed her the little bottle and watched her carefully uncork it and tip it to her lips to take a healthy swallow. The sharp, astringent taste stung her tongue and puckered her mouth, and she screwed up her face in a grimace of distaste.

“Blech.”

“You’d think alchemists would make their potions more palatable,” he said as she corked it again and discarded it on the mattress beside her.

“That’s how you can tell they work,” she quipped. “If they weren’t terrible, no one would trust them.”

He passed her the wet cloth, his fingers returning to her hair to idly comb through it. She gingerly wiped herself clean with a small wince at the touch to her tender lips and handed it back for him to do the same.

Another kiss touched the side of her head. “Wasn’t too rough, was I?”

“Mm, no. That was excellent. Though I’m glad I won’t be doing any riding tomorrow.”

“Give me half an hour and you could do some riding of a different sort—”

She snickered and relaxed into his hold. Her fingers trailed across his firm chest back and forth in time with his hand through her hair, hypnotically slowly.

“Tell me what it would be like,” she said softly. “That cottage in Brunwich.”

He was silent for several seconds. Then his voice came quiet and wistful by her ear.

“We’d build it sturdy and strong, paint the lintel and eaves. Three rooms would be all we’d need. A bedroom, a kitchen, and a room for all the mementos we pick up on our journeys. A yard with a stable for the horses, the outhouse a decent ways off so we don’t smell the stink. A smoker out back to cure meat from hunts. There’s good game to be had in Gustfields. Rabbit, deer, boar.”

“I went on a boar hunt in Velen once,” she said. “It charged away from the hunting party right at me, and I didn’t have a spear. I had to kill it with my sword.”

“Ha! Perhaps you should be the one to provide for us, and I’ll learn to cook. It can’t be that hard, can it?”

“Harder than you’d think.” She hooked her leg over his with a sigh. “And the swimming?”

“Every day,” he promised her, “until the weather turns and it’s too cold. Then we’ll bundle up indoors for warm drinks and watch the rain on the water.”

“Mm. Who’d look after the cottage while you’re out raiding? Can’t be me; I have my work.”

“It’s a quiet little village, full of salt of the earth people. Not rogues like us von Everecs. I’m sure our neighbors would look in on it for us.” He laughed quietly. “Or we’d bar the door and let the spiders watch our valuables, come home and sweep them out when we returned.”

“Kind of those spiders.” She tucked her head beneath his chin. “And where would Olgierd be?”

“With the band, in inns. They need someone to keep an eye on them, the louts.” His fingers slowed in their gentle carding through her hair. “How would you like a fourth room? A bedroom for my brother, hm? You could have your choice of beds each night.”

Her face flared with heat even as the thought sent a flutter of fascination through her. “You told off that villager for insinuating exactly that.”

“None of his business, was it?” he said. “You’ve eyes for Olgierd, and he’s not blind to your charms. I’m not possessive, skylark, nor inclined toward monogamy. I said it before; I only ever want him happy.”

“Vlodimir—”

“You want me,” he said softly. “That’s plenty good enough. If I’m free to wander, then you ought to be as well. Even into my brother’s arms.”

Her throat tightened, and she slid her hand from his chest to his back to hold him. “You wouldn’t be happy in a little cottage in a sleepy village. Not really. None of us would be.”

“Then we could travel the world together. It must get lonely, those long nights and days on the road as a mercenary. If Olgierd can ask Iris to run off with him, he can’t hold it against me if I do the same.”

She laughed into his collarbone even as tears prickled behind her eyelids. “Now I know you’re talking nonsense.”

“You don’t think I’d do it?”

“I think this band of yours is where your heart truly lies,” she said, “not with a woman you haven’t known for even a month. And you couldn’t leave Olgierd. He needs you.”

“It makes for a pleasant thought.” His arm tightened around her. “He is useless without me, poor sod. Cheerful as a bear with a sore paw. I can’t leave him to his own devices; he’ll brood himself into a stupor and never come out of it.”

“Then you’ll have to stay. For him.”

“And you’ll travel onward in the morning,” he sighed. “Where are you headed in such a hurry, blossom?”

“Toussaint,” she said honestly. “After that, I don’t know. Wherever the work takes me.”

“If it ever takes you back here, our door will always be open for you.” He gave her hair a light, playful tug. “As will my bed.”

“I’m sure we’ll see each other again,” she said. She kissed his collarbone and snuggled in closer, closing her eyes. “I may even take you up on that.”

“Ha! Bit late to play coy, beauty.” His fingers combed gently, soothingly, through her hair. “If we could only have one night, at least it was as fine a night as this.”

“Mm, mm-hm. Stay?”

“Until you fall asleep.”

She drifted off to the slow, peaceful strokes of fingers in her hair and soft and steady rise and fall of his chest beneath her ear.

The Pain of the Present

Chapter Notes

Beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

“And that’s that.”

Ciri buckled her rucksack closed and took a final look around her room. Nothing had been forgotten; everything was packed away and ready to go. Lidia’s borrowed shirt lay at the foot of the bed for laundering. The discarded garlands were still on the floor, stray petals scattered forlornly around them.

She hefted the rucksack’s strap gingerly onto her mostly healed shoulder. She’d dawdled and tarried as long as she could. Now there was nothing left to do but say her farewells and go home.

The downstairs was unusually empty for this time of day, save for Marta and her sister bustling from table to table clearing off used plates and cups. A pit grew in her stomach. Had they left without saying goodbye?

She hurried to the counter at the far end of the room and set her key atop it. The gray-haired matron from the night she arrived gave her a tired look and closed her hand over it firmly, as if to keep Ciri from taking it back and staying another night.

“Where are the von Everecs?” Ciri asked her.

The woman jerked her head at the wall facing the yard. “Whole band’s in the stables readying their horses. Haven’t left yet.”

Ciri rushed out the door and across the yard, her rucksack bouncing against her back with each long step. She could hear nickering and whinnies as she neared the stable, and the sound of rough, bantering voices through the open door.

A man she only vaguely recognized looked up from saddling his horse and smirked at her entrance. “Oi, Vlodimir! It’s your guest!”

“Don’t be a shit,” Vlodimir called back. “Fiona!”

Ciri tossed her head and made her way past the bandits tacking up their horses, suddenly acutely aware of how many of them must have been listening last night. No warm flush rose to her cheeks this time. She’d thoroughly enjoyed herself, and what they thought was of no import. Not when they’d never see her again.

The crowd of horses and bandits gave way to the emptier end of the stable, where Vlodimir and Olgierd adjusted Falka and Barghest's tack. At the sight of her, both brothers stepped away from their mounts and drew closer.

"You're riding out so early," she said, and she held back a wince at the plaintive note in her voice.

"Olgierd caught wind of a merchant caravan unloading wares in a village in Velen," Vlodimir told her. "We're off to take advantage before the opportunity passes."

Ciri glanced at Olgierd and stopped, her breath catching in her chest at the turmoil in his eyes. At the grief. He noticed her scrutiny, and with a blink and a small, swift smile, the storm disappeared behind the warmth he always had for her.

"And you're off as well," he observed. "Back to your employer?"

"Back to my employer."

She fell silent, uncertain what to say, how to even begin to say goodbye. Vlodimir solved the dilemma by closing the gap between them to catch her in a strong embrace, and she hugged him back tightly.

"Ahh, dewdrop," he sighed. "We'll miss you terribly."

"I'll miss you as well," she said into his shoulder. Her eyes stung. She scrunched them shut until the feeling passed.

He slowly released her, his hands trailing down her arms to catch her hands and squeeze them gently. Then, reluctantly, he let go and stepped aside.

Olgierd took in the two of them with nothing more than slightly raised eyebrows as he reached out for Ciri's hand. He held it in the space between them for a moment, her fingers against his callused palm.

"You'll always be welcome here," he said at last. "No matter what brings you back to Oxenfurt."

"Someday, if it's possible," she said softly, unwilling to turn down the invitation outright.

"You've been a true pleasure to host," he continued. He reached out with his free hand and carefully tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear to reveal the tourmaline earring dangling from her earlobe. "I hope your employers value you as highly as we do."

"Olgierd..." She broke off. "In another life, perhaps."

He raised her knuckles to his lips, his eyes fixed on hers. "Perhaps," he said quietly.

A large, warm hand settled on the small of her back as Vlodimir drew closer again. He turned her to face the stalls behind her and pointed to the last one still occupied.

“We want you to have her,” he said with a nod toward Umbra. “We’ve no one to ride her once you leave. Might not for weeks, if not months. You treat your mounts with the respect they deserve, and a fine horse needs a good rider. The two of you belong together.”

She jerked around to look between the brothers and found no disagreement on Olgierd’s face.

“She’s one of the best horses in the stable!” she protested. “You can’t just give her away; she’s worth a small fortune.”

“We can and we will,” Olgierd said. “You must take her. The best horse should have the best rider, and you need a mount for your journey. Allow us the privilege of providing one.”

Vlodimir cut off her argument with an arm around her shoulders, pressing his lips to her temple as he had last night. “Don’t argue, skylark. She’s been yours since you beat me in that race.”

“You’re too generous by half,” she said. “Thank you, both of you.”

“It’s the least we can do for such a delightful woman.”

He drew her to him and pulled her into a slow, warm kiss that sent a shiver down her spine. She leaned in, kissing him back desperately, uncaring of the audience, her chest tight with too many emotions.

His thumb stroked across her scarred cheekbone as he slowly broke away. “If you ever change your mind about that little cottage,” he said, his voice low, “one bedroom or two. You know where to find us.”

Her vision swam, wet and blurry, and she blinked away the tears and sniffed impolitely. “I’ll remember that.”

“No tears, beauty. We’ll see each other again, I’ve no doubt.” He winked at her. “Now tell me I’m awful and send us off with a smile.”

“You’re awful,” she said fondly, and the words felt like the softest of endearments in her mouth. “Go on. And stay safe, both of you.”

“No peasant has got the better of us yet,” Vlodimir said with a laugh.

He swung up into Falka’s saddle as Olgierd did the same by Barghest. On some unspoken signal, the band began to ride out the door in ones and twos, slowly emptying the stable. The brothers looked down at her for a charged, lingering moment, then Olgierd nodded and raised his hand.

“Farewell,” he said simply. “And take care.”

“You, too.”

Ciri watched them ride out, her heart cracking as they grew smaller in her view. Then, finally, they disappeared from sight. She took a deep, unsteady breath and turned to Umbra’s stall.

“Looks like it’s just the two of us now, girl.”

Umbra stuck her head over the door and nickered at her, and Ciri stroked her nose and unlatched it to lead her out.

“Let’s get you saddled up.”

Her shoulders didn’t hurt quite as much reaching up for the tack on the wall this time. She saddled and bridled Umbra without difficulty and mounted her with only the barest wince at the pull to her arms. Her mare walked obediently out of the stable at a gentle nudge of Ciri’s knees to her sides, and she proceeded out the yard and down the dirt road to the same out of the way place they’d used to travel to Tretogor.

Ciri leaned forward and stroked her neck. “Just like before, girl. Easy does it.”

She reached for her magic, feeling for the strands of time that surrounded all things, everywhere and everywhen. A pale green glow suffused the air around them as she found the path forward. And with a single step, they left the past behind.

The glow faded. A chill nipped at her through her blouse. She glanced at her surroundings to see she was right where she’d left, though the hedges were taller, wilder, and the sky was an iron gray threatening winter rain. She nudged Umbra’s sides again to turn her back toward the inn.

She didn’t recognize the weedy blond stable hand who leaped to his feet when she rode in, though there was something familiar about his face.

“Will you be staying long?” the boy asked, reaching for Umbra’s reins. “There’s room at the inn, if you’re looking for lodging.”

“No; I won’t be more than a few minutes,” she said. “Keep her saddled for me. I’ll be right back.”

The inside of the inn hadn’t changed much at all. The tables and benches were right where she’d left them a few minutes ago, though the patrons were entirely unfamiliar. She passed a trio of casually chatting men who looked like traders to her eyes and went to the counter where she’d just deposited her key.

Marta squinted at her in distant recognition. The intervening years had given her face the soft lines of middle age and threaded strands of white into her blonde curls, but Ciri knew her at once.

“In need of a room?” she asked. “We only have the one left.”

“In need of information, actually,” Ciri said. “The von Everecs. Where can I find them?”

Distaste crossed her face as her hand fell to the knife at her belt and then recoiled like she was touching poison. “What could you want with them? Most are dead, and good riddance. The last one up and disappeared a few years ago. His bloody free company’s still causing trouble without him at the helm.”

Ciri swayed, her heart dropping. She braced herself on the counter and shut her eyes against the news.

“The last one?” she heard herself ask from a great distance.

“Aye, Olgierd von Everec. Ataman of the Redanian Free Company.” Marta snorted disdainfully. “Little better than bandits, that lot, and him a heartless whoreson to boot. Pity Lady Iris, marrying into that family. Wouldn’t be surprised if he had a hand in her death.”

Ciri’s pulse pounded in her ears. Her hands trembled on the counter. It couldn’t be—this couldn’t be what Geralt meant for her to let happen. This couldn’t be what O’Dimm had wanted her out of the way for.

“Vlodimir is dead?” The question came out faint and pained.

“You been living under a rock?” Marta asked. “Man died over twenty-five years ago, on one of those damned raids of theirs. Hmph. No one’ll miss a man like that, I tell you.”

“I will,” Ciri said fiercely. She opened her eyes and glared at her. “*I’ll miss him.*”

She shoved away from the counter and strode out of the inn, slamming the door behind her. Frost-covered grass crunched beneath her frantic steps as she raced back to the stable. Marta’s words echoed in her head. *Disappeared. Heartless. Widowed. Vlodimir was dead.*

The weedy boy blinked at her as she stormed in. He held out Umbra’s reins, taking a careful step back.

“Sure you don’t need a room, miss?”

“*Very,*” Ciri snapped.

She mounted Umbra again and urged her out the stable doors at a gallop. Once out of sight of any passerby, she reached for her magic again and sent them halfway across the continent in the space of a heartbeat.

Umbra’s hooves clattered on Corvo Bianco’s cobblestones as Ciri reined her in. Geralt and Yennefer turned abruptly from the front door at the sound. She hadn’t been gone long, though it had clearly been long enough that they’d decided to wait inside.

“Ciri!” Yennefer called out. She picked up her skirt and hurried down the stairs, Geralt at her heels.

Ciri jumped from Umbra’s back and rushed past Yennefer to shove Geralt. He rocked back with the blow, his face holding nothing but sympathy.

“Why?” she cried. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Her cheeks went hot and tight as her vision blurred. She shoved him again and stiffened as his arms closed around her, rucksack, sword, and all.

“They were”—her voice cracked—“I liked them.”

“They liked you, too, from what I was told.” He held her close, his hand on the back of her head as if she were a child again. He still smelled like harvested vampire parts.

“*Why?*”

“You couldn’t draw O’Dimm’s attention,” he said quietly. “Olgierd was going to survive. I’d meet Vlodimir’s ghost and hear about you that way. Getting involved, changing things—it was too dangerous.”

“I could have—”

“You couldn’t.”

A sob broke free. Then another. Geralt’s shirt grew damp beneath her face as she wept miserably into his shoulder. He rocked her gently back and forth, his hand still cradling her head.

“Why does it hurt so much?” she asked him wetly. “He’s been dead for decades.”

Geralt held her closer. “He’s been dead for minutes. It’s all right, Ciri. It’s allowed to hurt.”

She sniffed hard and pulled away, scrubbing her eyes roughly with the back of her hand. “I want to know how you met them,” she said. “But... later. First, I need to stable Umbra. And then we need to talk about the manuscript.”

Yennefer came to her side and cupped her wet cheek. She looked Ciri over carefully, her sharp eyes not missing a thing. “They gave you a horse,” she said with raised eyebrows.

Ciri looked away. “She didn’t have a rider.”

“My daughter,” she said softly. “Come inside. We’ll clean your face. I want to take a look at what’s under those bandages as well. Geralt, you can see to Ciri’s new mare.”

Her mother set a guiding arm around her back and led her up the stairs and into the villa. Without a word, she took the rucksack from her shoulder and unbuckled her sword belt, laying them on the floor beside the dining room table.

“Sit,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

Ciri dropped into the indicated seat and slumped forward. Her eyes caught on the saber hanging on the wall, and another sob choked her.

Disappeared. Heartless. Widowed. Vlodimir dead.

“Look at me.” Fingers tilted her chin, turning her face from the wall, and she blinked to see Yennefer kneeling beside the chair with a wet cloth. Her mother dabbed at her face, watching her in silence.

“You’re not going to tell me there’s nothing more pathetic than a sorceress in tears?” Ciri asked through a tight, clogged throat.

“Shh.” Yennefer set the cloth aside and stroked her hair back. “I recognize heartbreak when I see it, and quite frankly I’d be worried if your eyes were dry. If he’s worth your tears, then shed them. Composure can wait until tomorrow.”

Ciri screwed her eyes shut as tears leaked from the corners. “He—he said we’d see each other again.”

“Oh, darling.” A soft sigh escaped her mother. “Were you planning on taking up with him? A sixty-year-old man?”

“No.” She sniffled. “I don’t know.”

Yennefer’s hand left her hair, and fingers deftly plucked the tie holding her shirt closed. The bandage on her left shoulder slipped off, and her mother hissed under her breath.

“Ciri, what—”

“A fleder,” she said tiredly. “It’s the same on the other shoulder.”

She felt a brief, light touch, and after a pregnant pause, Yennefer said, “At least they’re healing well.”

“Mm.”

“You’ll have to tell us how you encountered a fleder.”

“The manuscript,” she said with a limp gesture toward her rucksack. “It couldn’t be avoided.”

The door opened behind them, and Geralt’s even, quiet footsteps came around to the other side of the table. He sat in the chair beside her and gave her another sympathetic look.

“So...” he began awkwardly. “They treated you well?”

“Oh, *don’t*,” Ciri said. She bent to unbuckle her rucksack and pulled the manuscript out to thump it on the table. “There. Melchior Fabin’s manuscript. And it’s worthless, by the way. He invented spells for controlling vampires—it’s why they killed him. If you use the wards, they’ll know you have his book.”

Geralt cursed under his breath.

“We considered the possibility it might be pointless,” Yennefer said, though her lips thinned at the news. “Who had it? It couldn’t have been the library if you encountered a vampire.”

“Albrecht de Rycher, in Tretogor, and before him, Ilona van Jonne,” Ciri said. “I killed her, but he got away. Do you know him?”

“Only by name and reputation.” Yennefer finally got up from her crouch to sit at the table. “He’s a cold, ambitious man by all accounts. The last I heard, he’d fled with most of Redania’s other mages to Kovir and hadn’t returned despite Emhyr’s amnesty.”

“Then I’ll have to avoid Kovir for the next several decades,” Ciri said. “He got too good a look at me, and whatever he had planned with that manuscript, I’m the reason it failed.”

“I’ll ask Triss for more information about him,” Yennefer said. “If he’s still holding a grudge, or up to new tricks, we’ll soon know.”

“It wouldn’t be the first country I had to keep out of,” Ciri sighed.

Yennefer shook her head and looked to Geralt. “Well? Shall we pack up and spend the winter elsewhere? Or do we call on Triss or Eskel after all?”

“Maybe... hm.” Geralt leaned back in his chair. “Don’t know. Let’s give it another night and see what we think in the morning.” He glanced at Ciri. “And you’re injured again, so—”

“Fine.” She stood from the table and grabbed her rucksack and sword belt. “I’ll be upstairs. Let me know what you decide.”

She ducked the concerned hands reaching for her as she hurried off to her room, her boots loud on the wooden stairs. Her burdens fell unceremoniously to the floor, and she collapsed onto her bed to stare blankly at the wall.

Disappeared. Heartless. Widowed. Vlodimir was dead.

If this was what she’d agreed to stand aside for—

She buried her face in her pillow and wept.

A presence at her doorway woke her from uneasy slumber. She stirred and peered out at Geralt, rubbing gritty, puffy eyes with the heel of her palm.

“It’s over?” She beckoned him in. “You and Yennefer weren’t hurt, were you?”

“Only a little,” he said. He came and sat at the edge of her bed beside her legs. “Swallow took care of it.”

“I’m nearly healed; you should have let me help.”

“You needed the rest.” He slumped forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

“And?” she asked. “Are we leaving Toussaint for the winter?”

He shook his head. “Maybe. Gonna try giving the manuscript to Orianna first, see if she can arrange some kind of peace with them.”

“I thought she couldn’t control the local vampire population.”

“Not like Dettlaff could. But this is a bargaining chip, not a higher vampire power. Willingly handing over a book like this has to be worth something to them.”

“I hope it works.” She plucked at his sleeve and wrinkled her nose. “Make sure you bathe thoroughly before you go. You don’t want her to smell dead vampires on you when you’re giving it to her.”

“Hm. Good point.” A strained silence fell between them. Before it could become unbearable, he asked in bewilderment, “Vlodimir von Everec?”

“Don’t,” she said again, kneeling him as she sat up. “He was—”

“a boor,” Geralt supplied. “A hothead and a lecher.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel better by telling me he was awful, you can save it,” she snapped. “I told him as much frequently. And never seriously. He was *sweet*, Geralt. An incorrigible flirt, but that was part of his charm. He was funny. He loved to laugh, loved to have a good time. No one in the world meant more to him than Olgierd.

“I didn’t care that they were bandits,” she said. “Even if they claimed to be more than that. They were my friends. If things had been different...”

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “I hadn’t thought—I guess you got to know him better than I did.”

“How *did* you meet his ghost?” she asked. She drew her legs up beneath her to sit cross-legged on the mattress beside him.

“Part of a contract I took on for Olgierd,” Geralt said. He seemed to choose his words with care. “He wanted me to show his brother the time of his life, only he was dead. So, I had to summon his ghost. Shani needed a date for a wedding, and—”

“This is only leading to more questions,” she scolded him.

“I’ll get there,” he said. He grimaced. “I had to let him possess me for the reception in order for him to have his fun. He was”—he glanced at her—“a flirt. Boisterous. Had more life in him than most living men.”

“That sounds like him.” She scooted a bit closer and let her head fall to his shoulder. “And he’s the one who told you about me? How you knew I’d go to the past to begin with?”

“He told me about his death on one of their raids. Said it wasn’t so bad, though, because he spent his last night alive in the arms of the most beautiful woman in the Northern Realms.”

“He did not,” Ciri scoffed.

“Honest truth,” Geralt insisted.

“If he was bragging to another man and there were no women present, he’d have said he spent it between my legs,” she said. She laughed around the lump in her throat. “Don’t try to clean him up now. He was a rogue, and I liked that about him.”

Geralt chuckled. “Can’t get anything past you. Yeah. He, ah, got descriptive in praising your assets. I’ve been through some awkward situations, Ciri, but being possessed by a man who slept with your daughter has to be near the top of them.”

Laughter escaped her in an inelegant snort. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes.”

“That must have been some wedding reception.” She nudged his side. “Did you show him a sign? He told me he always wanted to see one.”

“Yeah, showed him Axii.”

“*Geralt!*”

“On a dog. He wanted to know if it would eat its own tail if he told it to.”

She snickered. “He had a wicked sense of humor. I can’t believe you thought he was serious.”

“We didn’t get off on the right foot.”

Geralt put his arm around her and pulled her in, and she sighed and slumped against him, her amusement slowly draining away.

“He said it was his last night?” She cursed inwardly at the fresh tears that brimmed in her eyes. “Then that morning, when they rode off—”

“I’m sorry.”

“You were wrong, you know,” she told him bitterly. “I stayed out of it; I didn’t get involved in their problems. O’Dimm still found me in Tretogor.”

Geralt’s arm went tight around her shoulders. “Did he—”

“He offered me the information I needed to get the manuscript so long as I told Olgierd and Vlodimir that I was leaving them and wouldn’t return.” She gave her eyes another hasty swipe. “I agreed.”

“That was the right choice,” Geralt said at once. “O’Dimm is dangerous, more dangerous than you can imagine. If you’d tried to challenge him—”

“What, like you did?” She pulled away and glared at him. “Why did Olgierd want you to show Vlodimir’s ghost a good time? How did you even meet Olgierd? Why do you have his saber? Why did the maid at the inn call him heartless, say he disappeared?”

“Ciri.” He caught her by the shoulders and met her gaze squarely. “It’s a long story. And not a nice one.”

He touched one of the earrings she’d forgotten to take out and gave her a significant look.

“Tell it anyway.” She glared harder at the reluctance in his eyes. “You kept things from me before and look how it turned out. Don’t you dare do it again.”

“I can’t.” He shook his head. “Can’t do that to you. If you want to find out for yourself, then I won’t stop you. But I won’t be the one to take both of them from you.”

Ciri flopped backwards onto the bed and stared up at the dark ceiling.

“He’s still out there, then? Alive?” She forcefully pushed away the dread of what his words could possibly mean.

“Yeah. But he’s not going to be how you remember him.”

“It’s been over twenty-five years. I know.”

“Not like that.” He shifted uneasily at the edge of her bed. “He’s... damaged. Been through a lot. Just—don’t go in with expectations. It’s all right not to go at all. You only knew him a few weeks.”

“No.” She sat back up abruptly. “If he’s alive and alone out there... I must go. At least to see that he’s all right.”

Geralt nodded reluctantly.

“I’ll leave when the winter’s over,” Ciri decided. “It can wait that long. But no longer than that.”

He hesitated a moment before patting her leg and standing. “Yen can scry for him before you go. Give you a good starting point.”

“Thank you.”

“This is probably a bad time to bring it up, but”—he gestured at the corset and heeled boots she’d failed to remove before crying herself to sleep—“let me commission armor for you. Please.”

“Manticore,” she agreed reluctantly. “And I’m keeping my boots.”

“Good enough for me.” He turned in the doorway, his face in shadow once more. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“So do I,” she said to her empty room once he’d left.

An Overdue Reunion

Chapter Notes

Beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you!

The little roadside inn seemed barely more than a waystation for couriers and tradesfolk, a solitary single-story building standing alone along the road nowhere near any town or village. To Ciri's eyes, it looked like any other Temerian inn she could afford on a witcher's pay.

But this was where Yennefer had directed her.

She dismounted and led Umbra to the small stable abutting the building. Three of the six stalls were empty; two were occupied by sturdy-looking horses of decent stock, one a bay and one a dun. And the third—

Her hand tightened on the reins at the sight of the magnificent white horse peering over the stall door at her. Tall, elegant lines, a proud neck, dark eyes, not a speck of dirt from the road to be seen on the coat...

She was in the right place.

Umbra patiently stood still as Ciri untacked her, and she went into the stall by the white horse without fuss. She stowed her tack in the trunk by the stall and rushed out, covering the distance between the stable and the inn's door at a near run.

Hesitance struck her as she set her hand on the door handle. It had only been a few months for her, but it had been over a quarter of a century for him. Would he even still remember her?

Would he want anything to do with her?

She steeled her nerves and opened the door. She'd come this far, waited out the winter in restless anticipation. However he reacted, however he felt, she needed to see him.

The inside of the inn's main room was smoky and dim, lit by candles on every table and a few small lanterns made of thick, uneven glass. A woman of indeterminate age sat behind the counter, and she looked up in interest at Ciri's entrance. Her eyes fell to the wolf's head medallion around her neck, and the interest turned wary.

"In need of a room?" she asked. "This is a decent inn; there'll be no trouble here."

"Just for the night," Ciri said, fishing an oren from her coin purse. "And I'm looking for a man. He's older, a redhead. Redanian—"

The woman pulled the oren from Ciri's fingers and pointed at the far end of the room. "Aye, he's been sitting there the past three nights. Drinking and whittling. Won't let no one join his table. Standoffish."

She rummaged beneath the counter and produced a key, which she handed to Ciri with a sharp look. "I'll have no violence in my inn. If you have a problem with that man, you'll take it outside."

"No—no, he's an old friend," Ciri reassured her.

"Hmph." The woman turned away. "Room four, down the hall and to your left. Breakfast is extra."

Ciri walked toward the end of the room past the other tables with their quietly talking occupants. Her feet slowed as she neared the figure seated at the farthest table, and her heart began to pound in her chest.

As broad shouldered as she remembered. The same deep red hair, no longer partially shaved but grown out and shaggy, the look of a man who'd ceased to care. No robe, but a sturdy leather jerkin. A short beard covering that sharp jawline. Large, scarred hands, absently holding a half-full tankard.

He seemed to have aged ten years since she'd seen him last—but he hardly looked like a man in his early sixties.

The candle's flame guttered and flared, and she held in a gasp at the scars thrown into sharp relief etched down Olgierd's cheek.

"The sight won't improve if you keep staring," he said without looking up from his ale. "Move on. I'm in no mood for company."

"I was told once there was no better company to be found," she said softly.

He went rigid at her voice. His hand clenched around his tankard. "I've enough ghosts in my life not to wish to suffer another. I'll not fall for this."

"Olgierd." Ciri took another step forward. "I'm real. I'm here."

With what seemed like an extraordinary amount of willpower, he slowly turned his gaze up at her and froze.

She nodded, her heart in her throat. "It's me."

"You're so young," he said hoarsely. He stood from the table and came to her, looking her up and down with an edge of fright in his eyes. "How? Was it O'Dimm? Did that whoreson get his claws into you? *What did you wish for?*"

"No, no," she rushed to say. She bit her lip as guilt squirmed in her stomach. "Nothing. This is... this is my time. It's only been a few months for me since we parted."

He took a step back, his breathing deliberate and even as he slowly calmed. Questions crossed his face and disappeared almost immediately, his mind answering them just as quickly as they came.

“Not O’Dimm,” he said at last. His tone was unreadable. “But you recognized the name.”

Ciri nodded cautiously.

He looked away with an expression she’d almost swear was shame. “I’ll not ask how. Bastard gets around, I imagine.”

“He certainly seems to,” she agreed.

“Mm.” He looked back at her. “Traveled in time.”

“Yes.”

“For a bloody *book*.”

“We needed it badly.” She shook her head. “It ended up being next to useless.”

“A mercenary,” he continued, his eyes narrowing on her medallion. “A former bandit. I imagine half the stories you told were outright fabrications.”

“Not if I could help it,” she insisted. “I did my best not to lie to you. You and Vlodimir were friends.”

“My brother was a bit more than that,” he said evenly. “I’d hate for him to have given his heart under false pretenses.”

Ciri glared. “I went home and cried for a day when I learned what happened after I left. I meant all of it.” She took a breath, her chest aching at the anger in his face, and demanded, “You’re more upset about untruths than *time travel*?”

“I studied the occult some years after we parted ways,” he said. “I know what’s possible through magic. Only one way to manage that feat, to my knowledge.” She took a wary step back, and his eyes went tired and sad. “And I’ve no interest in that sort of power.”

“I came all this way to find you,” Ciri said. She bit back a plea, an apology, a platitude. “I just needed to see that you were all right.”

He sighed, the last of the tension leaving him, and reached out with a scarred hand to gently tuck her hair behind her ear.

“Still have the earrings,” he said, his voice quiet. He took her hand in his and lifted it, and the wood and gray-blue stone bead bracelet shone in the low light. “And that little peasant bauble. Bloody hell. It really is you.”

Strong arms wrapped around her as she was pulled into a swift, fierce hug. The faint scent of tobacco smoke and vodka filled her nose. His chest hitched, just once, and he let her go and

stepped away, looking abashed and dry-eyed.

“Forgive me,” he said. He inclined his head at the table. “Will you join me?”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be,” she said honestly.

For the first time since her arrival, he smiled—a small thing, but genuine, and tinged with the warmth she remembered. “You’d be welcome company.”

They sat across from each other and stared in silence. Ciri let her eyes rove across his face, cataloguing each scar, each new line in his forehead, each small wrinkle by his eyes and on his cheeks, each bit of silver in his sideburns and beard.

Gods help her, he’d grown even more handsome.

His gaze dropped to the medallion around her neck, resting against her new leather armor, and he let out a huff of laughter. “Not from the Viper school after all.”

“No,” she admitted.

“Your witcher,” he said. A slow, rueful amusement tugged at his lips. “Geralt of Rivia.”

“He told me nothing about you before I went back.” She stared into his eyes, hoping he'd believe her. “I didn’t even know your names.”

He shook his head. “Nay, it was obvious we were strangers to you.” He sobered and gripped his tankard again. “I owe him more than I can say.”

“He didn’t tell me much when I returned, either,” Ciri said. She ventured to reach across the table to touch his hand, and it twitched beneath her fingers. “He said it was your story to tell. Though I did hear about Vlodimir and Iris from Marta, at the Black Mare. I’m so sorry.”

“As am I.” He lifted his tankard to his lips and drank deeply. “That book you sought—what came of it?”

“We gave it to a bruxa,” Ciri said dryly, and he snorted.

“I’d forgotten your cheek. Truly?”

“Truly,” she insisted.

“All that work just to hand it off to a vampire. Fiona”—he broke off at Ciri’s wince and raised his eyebrows—“That part not true, either?”

“It *is* my name,” she hedged. “Just... not my first name. It’s Ciri.”

“Ciri,” he echoed. He gave her a long look and nodded. “It suits you.”

“That’s good; I’d hate to have to change it.”

“And do you have a family name, Ciri of Cintra?” he asked her, a smile playing around his mouth. A hint of recognition came to his eyes.

“Ciri of Vengerberg,” she said firmly, and the recognition faded. “Daughter of Geralt of Rivia and Yennefer of Vengerberg, and witcher of the School of the Wolf.”

He laughed softly again, shaking his head and setting his tankard down. “Look at you,” he said. “Just like the morning we parted.”

“And you...” she trailed off at his grimace. “What happened?”

“A long tale,” he said. “One for another night, if you’ve the time.”

“Of course,” she said at once. Her eyes trailed up the scars crisscrossing his forearms to disappear beneath his shirtsleeves, and she blinked and looked away at the gentle clearing of his throat.

“I suppose we match now,” he said with another rueful smile. He tapped the pair of scars on his cheek, right where she’d kissed him so long ago.

“Hm. You look roguish,” she said, and he pressed his lips together to suppress a laugh. “What have you been doing these past few years? I heard that you—left Redania.”

She left unsaid Marta’s words about his fearsome reputation, his heartlessness, and her dark thoughts about Iris’ death.

“Drinking, mostly,” he said with a nod to his slowly emptying tankard. “I’ve taken to wandering. Money’s of no concern, and I’ve no desire to see the homeland again any time soon. I lend a hand where I can, though Temerians are slow to trust an outsider.”

Ciri sat there for a few seconds just watching him, trying to interpret the thoughts behind the melancholy that washed over his face. A sudden impulse grabbed her, and she reached out to set her hand on his again.

“Journey with me,” she said. “Sword in hand, through rugged Temeria.”

Dim remembrance flickered through his gaze.

“Days of seeking new thrills together,” she continued. “Just us and the open road, with nothing to tie us back.”

A sharp bark of laughter escaped him. His hand turned to grasp hers as he shut his eyes and leaned back against the wall.

“You said I only had to ask,” she said softly.

“So I did,” he agreed. His eyes held a suspicious sheen when he opened them again. “I’m not the company I used to be.”

“That’s fine.” She squeezed his hand. “You were a moody bastard half the time back then anyway.”

“Can’t argue that,” he said. He squeezed her hand back and gently pulled away. “It’s a kind offer. But you needn’t invite me along out of sentiment. We’re near strangers now.”

Ciri scoffed. “You are occasionally a clod, still, I see.”

He slumped forward, burying his face in his hands as his shoulders shook with laughter. “Ah, hell—I haven’t been called that since you left.” He sighed and looked back up. “I’d forgotten what a shit he could be. Suppose the two of us are the only ones left who remember him fondly.”

“Always,” she said. “*Always*.”

He looked at her for a long moment, shades of grief and understanding in his expression. “You and he—”

“We might have,” she said, “if I’d stayed. If I’d been able to.”

A little cottage on Miller’s Lake in Brunwich, with one bedroom. Or two.

That inexplicable shame flickered across his face again. “I’m sorry.”

“Come with me,” she urged him. “He’d hate to see you like this. You can’t just waste the rest of your life drinking in a corner. And you’ll be able to help more people if you’re on the Path with me.” At his reluctance, she added, “Wouldn’t it be nice to travel with someone who remembered better times?”

“Those were some of the worst times,” he said dryly. His eyes warmed. “Though you and Vlodimir were bright spots.”

“Those weeks in the past would have been so much emptier without the two of you,” she said. “I can’t ever repay that.” She reached across the table again, and his hand curled around hers. “I get lonely out there on my own. *You* hardly look like you’re enjoying your own company. Perhaps we can be a bit less lonely together.”

“Just like Vlod,” he said with a small, nostalgic smile. “Bloody relentless.”

“You’d better believe it.”

“If you truly wish my company on the Path—”

“I do.”

“—then you have it. For a contract, at least,” he amended. “You may tire of me, and I’ll not hold you to your offer.”

He got up from the table and came around the edge to stand at her side.

“I’ll buy us some supper,” he said at last. “And get you some ale. We’ll toast my brother and get to know one another again.”

His hand fell to her shoulder, and he rested it there for a second, warm and firm.

“When I could,” he said quietly, “I did miss you.”

He walked off before she could respond.

She watched a thin stream of tiny bubbles trail up to the surface of his ale, her mind whirling and her heart near to bursting with emotion. ‘When he could’? And he was so scarred, too young...

Vlodimir’s absence from Olgierd’s side throbbed like a bone-deep bruise. To never see that smile again or hear those ridiculous endearments—the loss hurt. It had to be so much worse for Olgierd, losing both his brother and his wife.

Geralt’s words from her first morning back in the present still sat cold and worrisome at the back of her mind. Whatever mess O’Dimm had ensnared him in, it had clearly had a terrible impact on him. She wouldn’t let knowing his story take him from her, no matter what Geralt had said.

A broad hand set a full tankard in front of her, jolting her from her thoughts.

“Innkeep will come ‘round with supper soon,” he said as he settled across from her again. He raised his tankard. “To Vlod.”

“To Vlodimir,” she echoed. “And to reunions.”

“And to reunions.” He took a swig and leaned back against the wall, warmth in his eyes. “Now. Tell it in full. What brought you back to Oxenfurt in search of that book, truly?”

Ciri laughed. “Well, to understand that, first you have to know that Geralt has some very unusual friends...”

The world narrowed around them as she spoke, shrinking to a rough wooden table lit by a flickering tallow candle. The concerns of the Path grew small and unimportant, the pain in her heart fading to a quiet background ache. The sounds of the patrons around them could almost be Olgierd’s band. Vlodimir was just away for a moment, fetching another bottle for them to share.

He smiled at her, and the young man he’d been smiled with him.

She had him back. Older, sadder, scarred—*she had him back*.

And damned if she’d leave him behind again.

End Notes

Comments and kudos are love.

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